

Pinning the Butterfly

Anna Girolami

Sebastian, patron saint of athletes and soldiers and a homosexual icon.

When artists first depicted Saint Sebastian, he was neither particularly sexualised nor particularly striking. By the Seventeenth century, however, Peter Paul Rubens was painting him as decidedly erotic with gleaming muscular body and loin cloth sliding from his flesh.

In the same century, Bernini, with his customary sensual style, sculpted him as a passive reclining figure wearing nothing but the arrows that penetrate his flesh and the curls that hang from his beautiful, semiconscious head.

- from "Saint Sebastian, Hagiography and Iconography", Elisabeth Weller, Oxford Press

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Phocomelia: A birth defect in which the hands and feet are attached to abbreviated arms and legs. The term comes from phoco (meaning 'seal') and melia (meaning 'limb'), to indicate that a limb is like a seal's flipper.

- Medicinenet.com <http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=4877>
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Sara Spagnola

About an hour ago via iOS - near Bromley, Bromley, Kent.

So, I'm on the train to London with my sculptor pal, Rhiannon (go see her show, by the way. It's at The Jewish Museum, Camden Town. Opens in three weeks - it's going to be stunning). We're sitting right by the door. At Rochester, a young guy in a wheelchair rolls up to get out. As far as I can see, he has no legs at all. At all. Ultra-high double-amputee.

The doors open and I'm about to check if he needs any help getting off. But he jumps out of his chair, throws the whizz-bang, light-weight chair out onto the platform and then jumps from the train, back into his chair. And he's away.

I don't know whether this guy's just an ordinary joe, a Paralympian or what. Whoever he is, he is very, very cool.

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Chapter One

I was an ugly kid.

At least, not so much when I was actually a kid.

You'll discover, through the course of these pages, that I dislike inaccuracy. Inaccuracy obscures truth and truth is a tricky enough butterfly to pin down, without adding a further layer of obfuscation. It is thus perhaps surprising that I'm a frequent liar. Rarely anything serious but it's not often a day goes past without my uttering some lubricating social deception. I would rather tell you, for example, that my parking ticket is about to expire than explain that I simply can't manage another ten minutes in your perfectly unobjectionable company.

I was adequately cute as a small child, as far as I have seen. Apart from the gap-tooth year, obviously. I was more of an ugly pre-teen and adolescent. And then again, not exactly ugly, as such (you see?). There has never really been anything wrong with my face although I'll concede that my profile is not good. My chin recedes and my forehead slopes back a bit. Side on, my entire face appears to be retreating from my nose. That hasn't stopped, hmm, five men, I think, over the years, telling me that I'm beautiful.

It's more that the whole package was just so badly presented. Overweight (until I shot up two inches over the course of one summer holiday), no kind of haircut and a dreadful pair of specs, clothes that only added to the whole dispiriting effect. I had no physical confidence whatsoever. Oh God, and the braces. I've only just remembered the braces. A gummy, crumbly pink palate.

Now that I come to think about it, so many years later, I'm not convinced I was even fat. I definitely *felt* fat. I can distinctly remember at the age of, must have been, about seven years' old, sitting on one of those upturned PE benches in my black leotard (with three-quarter length sleeves, terribly important) and definitely feeling fat. Certainly, I am cast in a different mould to my ectomorphic brother and sister. I have my mother's pear-shape. But genuinely overweight? No, I'm not convinced. I have very little proof. We have few family photographs and such as do exist probably went with my father to Italy. I don't know and I don't really care.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that I was an unprepossessing older-child-stroke-teenager. I did, however, have one redeeming feature that saved me from complete social debarment. I was clever. I still, I suppose, am. Top of the class, I was, for years, until Adelaide skipped Form 3 and got booted up to join us at the start of Form 4. She was my first serious competition.

It's not a tremendous position to be in. The clever, ugly one in the class. It's not cool, not remotely. Nonetheless, it's orders of magnitude better than being the stupid, ugly one in the class. We had a couple of those, too. So I survived, after a fashion. But as we all marched relentlessly towards womanhood, it got more and more difficult.

Sarah, my best friend in Form 1, had turned against me by the time we reached Form 2. She tried her hardest to bully me until I withdrew in self-defence. In conversation, she would call me "Barrel", tracing some convoluted derivation from my name, and then chide me for my lack of humour ("Oh dear, Sara, can't you take a joke?").

Maybe I *was* somewhat rounded. There's a shard of genuine, unwitting humour here that escaped me for many years. The other girl in this little love/hate triangle was called Cooper.

I still don't know what Sarah's problem was. It's possible that I was too clever. *She'd* been a serious contender for top of the class until I outpaced her.

My year in Form 2 was pretty grim. On a superficial level, I got on well enough with most of the other girls in the class but I never really knew what they meant and I think that feeling was generally reciprocated. Parties were incomprehensible to me. I watched everything as through a glass darkly. On occasion, I was a definite figure of fun.

Slowly, I started to drown.

*

I don't want to give you the impression that my classmates were spiteful in any out-of-the-ordinary way. The ordinary way, frankly, can be bad enough. We were a mixed bag. A small convent school in a pretty part of the capital's commuter belt was always going to throw together a haphazard mix of souls. We were a class of thirty two girls whose parents all believed, for their own disparate reasons, that a private education must somehow be better.

This belief flew in the face of the available evidence (which is quite funny and wholly appropriate, if you think about it). Our school possessed one half-full bottle of sulphuric acid, one treadle-powered sewing machine and no microscopes at all. Not for nothing was this the Convent of the Poor Clares. One or two of the teaching staff, though, were exceptional. They provoked within me a belief to which I still hold - that, *au fond*, it's the people, not the facilities, that make the difference.

A Venn diagram of my class would have resembled a small nidus of Staphylococcal bacteria, clustered together like grapes and gram-stained an appropriately ecclesiastical purple.

The biggest circle of this diagram would contain the daughters of our local aristocracy, such as it was. They were the daughters of the more-or-less wealthy farmers, the barely-landed gentry and the captains of local industry. These girls had horses and went to Young Farmers balls. They knew about sex before the rest of us.

The second circle would hold the Catholics. About a third of the class were girls from genuinely devout families whose parents wanted them steeped in a Roman Catholic environment. The Convent of the Poor Clares certainly provided that. On the first Friday of every month (and any other amenable Holy Day of Obligation), we Catholics would assemble behind Miss Morris under the plexiglass cloisters of the quad and troop across the road to Mass whilst the Pagans enjoyed a period of private study. Once, I forgot to go. I was a little late arriving into school and missed the crocodile winding from playground to church. It took me half the lesson to work out why we all just sitting at our desks reading books and why so many of us were missing.

The school had a fully functioning chapel, decorated vaguely in the Good News style. It had the necessary sanctuary lamp (which profession adopted the red light first, I wonder? Religion or sex, sex or religion? The two have always had a co-dependent relationship. Have you seen Bernini's St. Theresa?), a small confessional and a tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament. Nuns too decrepit to scurry the short distance across the road could receive the Eucharist in the chapel and we girls were frequently in there for other observances. There was a beautiful, sunburst monstrance.

I wonder where they took the Sacrament, at the end. One can't just chuck the Body of Christ into a bin.

We were encouraged use the chapel at break times for private prayer and we were happy enough to do so, although I'm not sure how much real praying got done. The place was warm and dry, and smelt addictively of polish. Our trainers used to squeak loudly on the high shine of the blond wood floor.

We weren't taught exclusively by nuns. On the contrary, once in the senior school, we were taught only infrequently by nuns. But nuns - some big, more small, all old - were scattered liberally around the school and they exerted a constant presence. Sister Bridget would sit, awfully, at the top of St Joseph's staircase each lunchtime. She never actually moved, as far as I can remember, but the collective intelligence held that she would belt us with her crook if we got too rowdy. Canny psychology, really. The collective intelligence reeled slightly when it somehow got about that Sister Bridget's real name was Nellie Smith.

They - the nuns - got everywhere, like mice on a farm. They served us lunch, they buffed the dark woodwork with dusters softer than their blouses and they mopped the floors, painted the same dusky, mucous membrane pink as the carbolic soap in all the toilets.

Once or twice during my seven years at the school, we even saw some of them in a car. Four nuns in a bright orange Austin Allegro is a jolting juxtaposition. Sister Alban would be driving. She must have been the only one with the necessary skills. Only now does it occur to me to wonder about her pre-devotional life, that she had time to pick up a driving licence. To us, the nuns were set in space and time, as unalterable as any fossil record. A decade after our departure, the fallacy of that belief would become apparent.

Then there were the smaller, miscellaneous circles.

There were a few parents who didn't want their precious flowers encountering the male members of humanity. These parents, quite literally, got their daughters to a nunnery. This particular circle had a fair overlap with the Catholic circle.

There was a little circle of girls who were somehow a bit different, either mentally or physically. I imagine their parents felt they might cope better in a smaller, gentler school. They were probably right although these girls still did not have a good time. We were not that pious.

Finally, in a circle all her own, there was one hopeless case. This delinquent had already been expelled from other establishments and had been sent to us in the

desperate hope, I think, that all these nicely-behaved religious young ladies would be a good influence. The Convent of the Poor Clares recast as Last Chance Saloon. I don't think it worked.

Caro "Bucky" Buckman overheard Miss Morris talking in furious stage whisper to Madam Dunstan one Friday afternoon. Miss Morris was our French teacher. She was a green-eyed, flat-heeled autocrat, the undisputed *éminence grise* in the community. She was militantly devout and, we reckoned, definitely a virgin. A nun in all but habit. In truth, her habits often appeared more religious than those of the nuns themselves.

"She was drunk, you know. Actually *drunk*. During my morning lesson."

"Are you sure? She wasn't just mucking about?"

"She reeked of it, she could hardly sit up. I took a half bottle of brandy from her bag. *It was nearly empty.*"

Needless to say, this information spread through the school as efficiently as any rotavirus. I wonder what happened to her. The delinquent, I mean. I know what happened to Miss Morris. The closure of the school in 1993 (ninety-nine years after its foundation) removed all purpose from her life and she died.

Me? I sat, with a few others, at the intersection of two of these circles. I slotted conveniently into the Catholic one. My parents are both Catholics, in name at least. In reality, my father has always been an avowed atheist, although he loves the art of Christianity and certainly approves of its rituals and restraints. It's a common enough paradox which I can recognise in myself and others. I suppose, after two thousand years, the rhythms and relics of the Christian Church have as much cultural resonance for many of us as they do religious.

My mother, in her fifth decade, became one of those fuzzy, ill-defined spiritual women, all shifting food intolerances and a hypothetical devotion to animals. It so often seems to happen to the menopausal. I strongly suspect she'd wear a pair of fairy wings and spin crystals even now, if she didn't worry (rightly) that we'd laugh her into ridicule. Like my brother and sister, I was baptised and believed avidly through my teenage years until I lost my faith at midnight on Christmas Eve in 1987.

My real place in this over-lapping diagram, however, was the nunnery circle. There is no doubt at all that my father didn't want his two girls encountering boys of any mien. What I have only recently come to understand is that it wasn't just boys. Dad didn't really want his children (or his wife, come to that) meeting *anyone at all*. If he could have done, he'd have concealed the outside world from us altogether. The five of us should have lived in a silvered sphere of total internal reflection, in which domain he was the gracious dispenser of largesse and dictator of souls. And we should have been grateful and revered him.

Once, I asked to join the Brownies:

"I'm sorry, darling, you can't."

"Why not? Juliet's in the Brownies, she says it's brilliant."

"I'm sorry, darling. Your father doesn't like that sort of paramilitary organisation. He doesn't want you or your sister getting mixed up with them."

Venn diagrams aside, ours was rather an extraordinary class, I think. Later, when I was safe, I was able to look about me and better appreciate the girls nearby. We shed some of the chaff along the way and the remaining core of our heterogenous sorority contained a disproportionate amount of talent - a couple of first class minds, a couple of exceptional artists, one opera-worthy singing voice, an extraordinary horsewoman and an awful lot of drive. That's a lot, I think, in one small class. Certainly, we were more distinct than the classes immediately up- and downstream of us. I suppose I may be biased.

My inability to connect with my classmates cannot really be laid at their feet. But wherever lies the blame, by the time I was twelve I was slowly and silently sinking.

*

Rhiannon Williams saved me from drowning.

Rhiannon was different. It didn't seem to impinge upon her; she just was what she was, without effort or doubt. At least, that's how she seemed at the time. These days, I'm not quite so convinced of that. The rejection of doubt was certainly real enough.

I can see her now, standing in a large puddle at the bottom of the quad steps (with scornful disregard for her wet trainers), stamping the water at anyone who comes near and laughing, laughing. That's Rhiannon - spotting the moment, shaping the action and commanding centre stage.

I see her, too, on a real stage, the one in our school hall (that hall whose parquetry required us always to be in trainers). I see her twirling her tail as the big-hearted, lily-livered Lion, in the Wizard of Oz. She was in the B cast, since we were only Upper Fifth at the time. The A cast Lion was a large and important girl of the Upper Sixth. Rhi blew her off stage.

Rhiannon was big and blond and loud. She lived a long way off and took the train to school every day. She had allergies and asthma and her blue inhaler was always to hand. She had been learning French since she was eight. By her own account, she was a near-county standard swimmer. She wasn't posh but she had class.

She was also, as you will have deduced, Welsh. She still is, of course. Not just Welsh but North Welsh. And then, northerer even than that. Her family come from somewhere small on the north-east coast of Anglesey. Take ten steps due north from the middle of the village and you drop straight into the Irish Sea. Being Welsh is a big deal to Rhiannon.

She landed at our Convent of the Poor Clares at the start of Form 2, having outgrown her preparatory convent school in Gravesend. For that year, she and I did not particularly collide. She hung around with Suzanne, who was spoilt and posh-ish but who lacked class, if you ask me. At the same time, I, I suppose, was occupied with negotiating the end of my relationship with Sarah.

Form 3, however, was a different matter.

I don't know why she and I should have suddenly connected at that point. Quality cleaves unto quality, if you ask me. But with no preamble and certainly no particular design that I was aware of, when we reconvened after the long summer break, the two of us were immediately inseparable.

I felt as if I had been pulled from a hostile sea. With Rhiannon, I didn't feel, perpetually, to be in the wrong place, saying the wrong thing, wearing the wrong thing. Rhiannon didn't seem to give a stuff what anyone wore. Rhiannon, in fact, made anything she wore the right thing. With Rhiannon, it didn't feel ridiculous to read Shakespeare or not to know anything about Starsky and Hutch. Rhiannon was Sebastian to my Charles. Perhaps, more accurately, I was Charles to her Sebastian. I'm sure that's how she - and everyone else - saw it.

*

It wasn't just my school days that were transformed by this new friendship. I spent the better portion of four summer holidays at Rhiannon's house with her family scattered about. She would come to mine on occasion but, more often, I went to hers. This was partly because we both preferred her place to mine and partly because, in order to get to her, I had to take a train and then a bus. The physical act of moving away from my house was an intense and precious pleasure to me. Besides, Rhiannon tends - has always tended - to draw things to her while she stays put, as central as the sun.

Her environment was so different to mine that it seemed, truly, an alien world. Rhiannon's mother was a hairdresser and her father was..well, these days he would be called an artisan craftsman, I suppose. I'm not sure there was any particular word for it, back in the eighties. Whatever you called him, he made balustrades, cornices, statuary, all the decorative twiddly bits that so often need restoring on the outside of nice buildings.

My memory is that he did the whole lot himself - modelling the necessary pieces, making moulds from some sort of horrible, irritant glass fibre resin, casting replicas from these moulds and finally placing them *in situ*.

He was self-employed, working out of the back yard and the garage. Sometimes he worked alone, but more often, he dragged in a mate, his wife or the two children. It was highly-skilled and physically demanding work that, like a lot of such work, paid bugger-all but he clearly loved it. Rhiannon was half-scathing, half-adoring of her father's cheerful and unquenchable belief that his big break was just around the corner. They'd be millionaires by Christmas. Eventually, he was almost right but it took a long time.

Scathing or not, Rhiannon loved to help her father in his work and wore the muscles that resulted as battle trophies.

"You were always a strong girl, Rhiannon," remarked her mother one Saturday tea time, as she cut her daughter's wet hair in front of the kitchen mirror. "I remember when you were six weeks old, I left you lying in the middle of our bed for a couple of minutes while I had a wee. Thought you

couldn't possibly come to any harm. But when I got back, you'd managed to roll off the bed onto the floor."

The pride was audible in her voice and visible, too, reflected in Rhiannon's face. Her father, sitting at the table opposite me, was equally keen to promulgate the family mythology:

"You know, Sara, when Rhiannon was nine months old, her Uncle Jim came round and was horrified to see her standing up. He thought we'd rigged it, we must have propped her up against the wall. He couldn't believe she was already so strong."

I was obviously required to be impressed so I did my best to oblige but, in truth, I had no knowledge, then, of developmental milestones. This early evidence of infant prodigy went straight over my head. I do know that Rhiannon never looked more like the sun than she did at that moment.

There was a portrait of her in the hall, it's still there, as far as I know. It didn't look a lot like her, I thought, but she had been much younger when it was taken. An idealised study of a blond, blue-eyed butter-wouldn't-melt in pastels or pencils or something. Not paint, anyway. There must have been an equivalent picture of her brother somewhere but I don't remember seeing it.

I remember those four summers as time spent in Arcadia. The Williams were a close-knit family with an ever-present and visceral humour that simultaneously entranced and embarrassed me. In my house, we tiptoed past the visceral with eyes averted.

"Belly," pronounced Jamie, one tea time. Rhiannon's brother was two years' our junior. "Belly, belly, belly." He sat back in his chair and grinned. "Such a good word." He produced it from his mouth again like a large and wobbly soap bubble. "Mmbelly."

"Not bad," admitted Rhi. "Chunks. I like chunks."

"Chunks, chunks...chunks." Jamie, giggling, repeated the word over and over, until it had lost all sensible meaning. If "chunks" can ever have a sensible meaning.

"Crepuscular, that's a good word," I volunteered. No-one has ever giggled at "crepuscular".

It wasn't just her family who fascinated me. The main players were flanked by a colourful supporting cast who frequently wandered in and out of proceedings.

Gio Baldutti was one such. He looked a bit like a football manager, now I come to think about him again. Camel overcoat, cigar, vague aura of underlying illegality. What he was, actually, was a local ice cream baron. He had a few parlours - *Baldi's* - in the North Kent area. I have no idea how Rhiannon's father knew him, maybe he'd done some work on one of the parlours.

One evening, he turned up out of the blue, just as we were finishing dinner.

"Come and see the new car, Dave," he bellowed genially at Rhiannon's father, in the fluent Mockney that Anglo-Italians so often settle into. "She's a beaut."

Of course, we all tumbled outside to find a brand new, bright white Daimler parked outside the bungalow. We were more than happy to be taken for a drive. Jamie and I were in the back, either side of Rhiannon.

It was a lovely car. My Dad drove a nice car - an Alfa Romeo - but this was a different sort of nice. Smoother, more opulent.

"What do you think, kids?" asked Gio, grinning at us via the rear view mirror.

"It's gorgeous," I piped up. It was.

"For Heaven's sake, Sara," snapped Rhiannon, "don't be so uncool."

*

The second of those summers was the summer that Rhiannon didn't eat. Really, she didn't eat. I couldn't grasp what she was doing then, nor do I really understand it now. Anorexia? No, I don't think so. I come across anorexics from time to time at work; she was nothing like them. Anorexics seem to use their condition to stop their lives moving forward. With Rhiannon, as far as I can penetrate it, it seemed to be exactly the opposite. I think she wanted to be more grown up and I think she wanted to be thinner when she got there. So she stopped eating until she was thinner. Typical Rhiannon, really. Choose your goal, make your effort, achieve your goal. Bam! Simple. If your parents have to be unhinged with worry for a few months, well, that's a shame but so be it. You have to be strong enough to get through these things.

She showed none of the denial of the situation that anorexics generally employ. She was, in fact, very amusing about it. I remember her impersonating, for our benefit, her father's frantic reaction to the fact that she'd agreed to eat a slice of pizza. Her physical portrayal of his jumping up and upsetting everything off the kitchen table was vividly realised.

"Quick! Get the pizza, get the pizza!" She had his gruff tones, so startlingly unlike her own beautiful voice, down to a tee.

That had disconcerted me a little, at first. Rhiannon and I both speak with Received Pronunciation, hers a little nicer than mine, I would say. I speak the way that my parents speak so it was a slight, if unmarked, surprise to find that Rhiannon's parents and her brother favoured the local accent. So does the man she married in 1994 and so do their two boys, she never seems to care. But she speaks..perfectly. To this day, only flawless RP issues from her mouth. At least, it did the last time I saw her, that blustery day two months ago, when she used those flawless syllables to call down retribution on me as I walked away from her.

*

Four wholly sufficient and blissfully unquestioning years could not last forever. As I got older, I started - inadvertently - to couple my reason to my perception. The results could be unsettling.

One torrential lunchtime in the autumn of 1982, Rhi and I and Bucksy Buckman were in our Upper Fifth form room at the top of St John the Evangelist's, down the corridor from the impoverished science laboratory. We draped limbs over the backs of our wooden desk/bench combinations and sprawled torsos over the scratched, blotted tops.

"Mother of God, this rain. *Mère de Dieu, je m'ennuie de cette pluie.* Rhi, what's Welsh for rain?"

"Dunno." She grinned, "*Rainddhu?* What would it be in Italian?"

"Hmm, *piove* maybe. Something like that." I grinned at her, "We're not much cop between us, are we? What's your Dad's Welsh like?"

"Non-existent now. He left when he was very small."

Bucksy put in her two penn'orth. "What about your mum?"

"Nah, she's a Driscoll. Irish. As Irish as Irish can be. And she's always lived in Kent. Dad's half-Irish too, actually. His mother was from Donegal originally."

I struggled to make sense of this. Something was tapping at me, some embryonic hunch. This hunch stayed with me, spore-like, ever after although it would be another thirty years before it broke open to reveal its bitter nucleus.

"So, let me get this straight. You were born here and have always lived here. You only speak English. Your father, who is half-Welsh, half-Irish by blood, lived in Wales for the first few years of his life and then moved to England. He only speaks English. Your mother, wholly Irish by blood, has always lived in England and also only speaks English. That right?"

She was blithely indifferent to my query.

"If you're born in an orange-box, doesn't make you an orange, does it? I'm homesick for weeks whenever we come back from Anglesey. It hurts, it actually *hurts*." She rubbed her fist vaguely around her epigastric region. "It's a very strong bond. I can *feel* there are rhythms in me that are so Welsh."

"Welsh rhythms? What do you mean?" I was genuinely interested.

Rhiannon snorted slightly.

"I don't expect you to understand. It's too..too deep to explain really." She gazed out of the window for a couple of seconds. "The music, the sea." She turned back to us, grinning broadly, "And the rugby, of course."

Rhiannon was certainly passionate about rugby, favouring the Union code over the League and backing the Welsh team against all comers. It's a shame, really, that there was no readily-available way for her to play the game, at that time. She'd have been good at it or bust. Instead, she was a bull-doing hockey player. Centre-forward, naturally, and with a tendency to put her head in the way of the ball. I was her inevitable centre half. Our other winter game, netball, was simply not her thing. I think she chafed at its territorial restrictions.

As I was mulling on the notion of these mysterious rhythms, a bunch of our classmates clattered into the room. The conversation turned, as it was wont to do when Suzanne was present, to the engrossing topic of dress. Suze started avidly describing what she had worn to a party the previous Saturday.

"Yellow and very fitted through the bodice," she related, running her hands down her ballerina's ribcage in illustration. "You know, I never used to like yellow but I'm getting a real thing about it lately. It's such a happy, *sunny* colour."

"With those peacock feather earrings?" asked Bucksy. "Lovely colours."

"Not those earrings, it was a bit of a posh do. I had a pearl choker. Not real but I don't think that matters, at our age, do you?"

"No!" interjected Rhiannon suddenly, with odd emphasis.

Suzanne beamed at her. Everyone loved getting Rhiannon's seal of approval.

"No, I agree. I think costume jewellery can look fine."

"No!" she said again, with the same odd intonation. "I mean, no that's wrong. They have to be real."

There was a brief silence while we all considered this. Bucksy, bless her, possessed either of an extraordinary tact or a complete lack of it, burst the uneasy bubble by pressing Suzanne for details of the young men at the party.

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I didn't know it but the end of the beginning was already well under way, by the time of that rainy lunch hour in the Upper Fifth. Like Spring, the shoots were quietly, unstoppably sprouting long before there was any visible evidence of the process.

In the preceding Christmas holidays, our PE teacher, Miss Goodison, had taken the class to Italy for a week's ski-ing. This was a thrilling event in our cloistered little world and it was a huge success. I heard all about it - *ad nauseam*, frankly - in January when everyone came back to school.

That brief sojourn in Italy proved to be a watershed for Rhiannon and thereby, ultimately, for me. She enjoyed the ski-ing immensely which I could have predicted. What I didn't see coming was her falling in love for the first time in her life. For months after, she wore, like a scapular, a lanyard bearing her ragged ski pass and a photograph. The picture was of Nicolo Rosso, a young Italian, the same age as us.

I'm pretty sure nothing overtly physical happened between them (they were both fourteen and both Catholic, after all) but Rhiannon was certainly greatly in favour of this young man. The photo showed Rosso and his friend, Matteo, standing on the sands of the Veneto, striking carefully casual poses in their swimming trunks. Matteo, taller and paler, showed the uncertain, snappable length of recent growth. Rosso (she always called him Rosso), by contrast, was tanned and compact. Short but nicely muscled. Rhiannon held that he looked like a Greek God. I demurred at that, silently. I hadn't yet fully configured my idea of a Greek God, but I suspected it was taller than that.

Rhiannon never saw Rosso again. I don't know that they even corresponded. But she stayed loyal, to his idea and to his image, for our remaining year and a half with the Poor Clares. One Saturday, she happened upon an old pair of black skis in a second hand shop in Chatham and raised merry hell until she was able to buy them. She kept them propped up in the corner of her bedroom as some kind of..some kind of what? Some kind of icon, I suppose. God knows where they went, she certainly never skied on them. Love is sometimes simpler when you're fifteen, if no less painful.

For me, Rosso eventually came to represent the exact opposite, not that I was immediately conscious of that. He represented the end of simplicity. Rhiannon followed him out of our twin firmament then and started to explore a wider, more populous galaxy. It was a galaxy to which I had no access at all, at that particular time.

I became only gradually, gropingly aware of this but eventually it started to feel all too familiar and I knew I was at risk again. I would write bad vignettes about it:

You saved me when I was drowning in the Sea of Careless People
and, for a while, as we went along together, I was safe and happy.
But the Careless People caught you up in their frenzied whirlpool
and you left me to drown, deeper than before.

But things were a little easier this time. By now, I could swim a bit and I'd earned a few buoyancy aids too. I was taller, thinner, and very close to acquiring the contact lenses that I'd wanted for so long. I'd taught myself to drink gin and orange without shuddering. I knew how to put on eye-liner, although mascara was, as yet, a messy mystery. I knew, too, that my parents couldn't reliably detect a grey eye-liner against my dark eyes. My mother stopped choosing my clothes. I remember a white silk blouse, asymmetrically buttoned, with diagonal ruffles from shoulder to navel. Photographs have subsequently revealed it as hideous but I loved it.

I walked out of the Convent of the Poor Clares and into the summer of 1983 with very, very good O level results and my chin up.

This time, I didn't drown but drifted awhile, watching intently and just about keeping my nose above water. Eventually, I acquired sufficient knowledge and skills to direct my own forward movement.

Chapter Two

“Oi! Stop that! Do you want your face cut to shreds?”

Nate Turner smiled wickedly down at his naked wife. He removed his hand from the back of her neck, as requested, but placed it deliberately on her left breast. She had both hands on his face, was tracing the angle of his jaw with her fingers and a razor, methodically removing every last trace of shaving oil. Nate was perfectly capable of shaving himself but this had become an occasional ritual for them, a shiny little erotic episode to brighten the upcoming day. Sometimes they got dressed and went to work straight afterwards. Sometimes..they didn't.

Mindy inhaled as Nate's hand on her breast asked the question. She ran her index finger thoughtfully down his equally naked chest but answered him in the negative.

“Not this morning, love. Got a seven thirty. I've got to be out of here in five minutes.”

“Cancel it.” He kissed her neck, nudging her blond hair out of the way.
“They can use the cross trainer without you.”

Mindy laughed. “You'd think, wouldn't you?” She tilted his face upright again and ran her fingers maddeningly all over it, making sure she'd got every bit.

“Right, you're done, love.” She grabbed a towel from the rail and dried his face, standing on tiptoe to place a kiss on the tip of his nose. “Out of the way, Nate. Really, I have to go.”

He scowled facetiously but relinquished his hold on the sturdy cylinder of her body. The two shuffled around in the tiny bathroom and Mindy disappeared to get dressed.

Nate leaned over the bath to turn on the shower and while he waited for the sputtering stream of water to heat up, he studied himself in the mirror. He thought, as he often did, how wrong everyone else was. *His* was the better shape. Why mar the elegant perfection of a straight line with two ungainly perpendiculars?

Mindy, fully clothed, stuck her head back into the bathroom.

“I'm off, love. I'll see you tonight - I'm going to be late, remember? Got my Thursday study-buddy session. You at Mottram's this afternoon? Have a nice day.”

With that, she darted out of the bathroom and clattered down the stairs. Nate heard the front door of the house open and then shut with a bang. He climbed into the shower.

After breakfast, he dressed in the short-sleeved shirt and cotton chinos that he'd long settled on as a working wardrobe. He hadn't bothered with a tie for years. As far as he could see, the tie was dying out. An obsolete relic of a more buttoned-up world. Besides, he had once been grabbed by the tie and nearly

throttled. He'd wriggled out of the situation without injury but switched to open-collared shirts nonetheless.

Into a rucksack, he stashed a polo shirt and pair of jodhpurs alongside his packed lunch, wallet and keys. He shrugged on a fleece jacket and then the bag and set off on his walk to work.

It was a mile and a half, just over, from their bedsit on Primrose Rise to the bottom of Rushey Green. Nate swung easily down Lewisham Hill, its trees hinting pale green, and onto the southern section of the High Street. Here, the stop-start cars nearly shunted each other in their frustrated desperation to get to the nucleus of London. He could never understand why anyone within the limits of the South Circular bothered to own a car, let alone tried to use it to move around.

Once beyond the eyesore that was the shopping centre, Lewisham High Street became a wide, tree-lined boulevard. Nate walked past St Mary the Virgin, past the registry office where he and Mindy had finally got married, past the hospital.

As Lewisham started to become Catford, the High Street continued, without obvious join, as Rushey Green. At this time of the morning, the thoroughfare was a rolling, boiling melting pot of people, no two the same colour or shape. Nate saw every conceivable hue from translucent alabaster to the deepest inky black, with all shades of brown, orange, yellow and pink in between. He saw people on crutches and people in wheelchairs. He saw - separately - two people who muttered, audibly and tonelessly, as they walked. He counted meeting places - the Right Now Jesus Congregation, the Lewisham and Kent Islamic Centre - for five, might have been six, major religions.

In the midst of this bubbling diversity, Nate still managed to stick out like a sore finger. On this chilly March morning, no-one gave him any trouble.

Just after half past eight, he arrived at Lewisham's Citizens Advice Bureau, sitting right at the intersection of Rushey Green with the South Circular. The Bureau squatted inside a brick cube that somehow managed to look like a portakabin. Next door was a yellow-fronted property that at least had the balls to declare itself properly as a pawn-broker's.

He unlocked the front door, went inside and installed himself at the large desk that took up too much of the small anteroom. He switched on the computer and, while it fired up, he wondered what the morning would bring. Most of the time, he dealt with an unleavened stream of the bewildered, the bitter and the out-and-out bastards. Just occasionally, there was a challenging bureaucratic tangle to unravel which would exercise his mind for a while. On a really good day, he might also get the satisfaction of sticking it up some faceless mandarin somewhere.

But not today. The four hours of this shift brought only the drifters and floaters that London seemed to generate without cessation and at half past twelve, he gratefully handed the desk over to Mercy. He trudged back the way he'd come, as far as the A20 and hopped on a number 321 bus to a different world.

*

Mottram's Riding School in Sidcup, Kent was as unlike the Bureau as it was possible to be. The Bureau was a tight, cramped little space, overrun with body odour and worry. Mottram's held its fresh air and wide horizon as God-given rights.

Nate always enjoyed his fortnightly visits here. The physical challenges were considerable but that was what he enjoyed the most. His greatest pleasure came from pitting his fit, strong body against a system designed, basically, for other people.

As he crossed the yard, heading for the changing area, one of the stable girls was coming the other way, grimly leading a tall horse who clearly had different ideas about where he should be. She nodded a greeting at him ("Nate. All right?") as they passed each other.

That was another thing he liked. Here, he was just another rider. Nate had no real problem with being the local freak. In fact, he had been known to play upon the fact when it suited him. But it was nice to have a breathing space. Nice to have somewhere where he could just *be*. He'd been coming to this riding school for four or five years. As far as everyone here was concerned, he was just part of the fixtures and fittings.

This afternoon, he had a lesson booked with Malc, one of the instructors, and his current favourite horse, Loveflower. *Loveflower!* Fucking stupid thing to call a horse, he thought, but she'd been named by her original owner (a waffy, tree-hugging moron, who had lasted only three months before moving on to her next fad). Somehow, the name just suited the cheerful animal and it had never been changed. Now she was one of Mottram's most popular horses.

He'd mastered the basics of horse-riding, up to a point. Things had become much easier when it had occurred to him to have his riding boots altered a bit, it meant he could use his feet better. His current challenge was to improve his jumping. So far, proper height eluded him. The only time he'd tried to take Loveflower over a half-decent jump, he'd lost his balance and tumbled sideways. The horse had dragged him by one foot for a few yards before she stopped, turned round and nuzzled his ear whilst he lay, furious, on the ground.

Of course, he couldn't reach up to free his foot from the twisted stirrup and when the others finally got to him, they found him kicking pointlessly at it with his other leg. Embarrassing. He'd worked tirelessly on his core strength and balance since then. Mindy's knowledge - and her staff discount - had been invaluable.

That sunny March afternoon, he and Loveflower spent much of their session bickering. As sometimes happened, he couldn't quite find her wavelength. Either that or she was deliberately ignoring his attempts to do so. Horses - as a species, always so bloody-minded. He bit back his frustration and concentrated instead on the brusque advice of his instructor.

Several times during the lesson, as he was persuading the animal over the modest jumps set up in the outdoor ring, Nate caught a splash of yellow in his peripheral vision. It stood out bright against the predominant khakis and dark blues of the environment. Eventually, he realised that this splash was emanating from a woman he didn't know. At times, she seemed to be watching him. That didn't overly bother him; strangers to the school always watched him.

When the lesson was over, he walked Loveflower gently back towards the stables. The woman in yellow was standing outside the office building with Tina, one of the other riding instructors. Tina was a typical example of the type - direct, effective, frighteningly competent. Nate knew her to be a superb horsewoman.

The woman in yellow, however, was a completely different kettle of fish. Unlike every other woman in the yard, she blazed colour. Her short, stand-up hair was red. Really red. Red like a strawberry is red. She wore a mannish, sunflower yellow shirt, a long turquoise skirt and Wellington boots. She had a solid, definite body and an air of enjoying the space that she occupied.

She detached herself from her companion and, to Nate's irritation, approached him directly. Her blue eyes stood out clearly in a broad, angular face.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Rhiannon Hughes. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Posh voice she had, but that wasn't unusual in a riding school. He wouldn't necessarily hold that against her. Not yet. As she spoke, he could see her eyes flitting around him, not knowing quite where to settle. Nate was a past master at gauging the way that people looked at him; her reaction was the one that he hated the most. That shifting gaze of the educated middle class who knew they should know better but couldn't quite get over their embarrassment. It always brought out the worst in him. He stopped walking, turned to face her and then deliberately leant forward a little, holding out his right hand.

"Nate Turner. What can I do for you?"

She looked down at his hand and then, blankly, back at him. She ignored the gesture but said:

"That's a beautiful horse. What's his name?"

Nate left his hand out just slightly too long. Had she really stopped him just to fawn over the horse? He answered shortly.

"She's called Loveflower. Was that all you wanted?"

The woman called Rhiannon grinned suddenly. Her charisma was almost tangible.

"Loveflower? Really? She's so beautiful. You two looked so good together - really moving as one, such a clear connection between you. So *strong*."

Despite that charisma, she wasn't endearing herself to him so far. But now that he had had a proper look at her, something was scratching in his memory. He

had the vaguest sense that he'd seen her before. Fuck knows where. Not the Citizens Advice Bureau or Mindy's gym. And certainly not The Joiners Arms, the boozier where he and Mindy spent their Friday and Saturday nights.

"Look, I'm busy. Did you actually want anything?"

"I've got two horses, you know. One's a chestnut, like this one."

She was difficult to age, neither old nor young, but gave every appearance of being fully in her prime. She looked, really, as if she had been born straight into her prime and would remain there until the day she died.

"Oh yes? What's your thing? Dressage? Cross country?"

He was mocking her but he wasn't sure she noticed.

She answered him earnestly, "I'm really into Western riding but I don't ride my two yet. They need a bit of sorting out first."

This made no sense at all to Nate.

"What do you mean you don't ride them? They're pets?"

He made no attempt to disguise his disdain. Blushing, she hastened to correct his erroneous impression.

"No, no. I'm definitely *going* to ride them. I can't wait. It's just..they're..one is..a bit temperamental..well, one of them particularly..I'm definitely *going* to ride them. Once they're sorted out."

Nate looked at her directly again. His already-brooding brows came down further as he frowned at her.

"So you can't ride. Whatever. Look, what is it you want? I need to get on. The horse is getting cold."

She gave him another odd, blank look and seemed loathe to answer. Nate ran out of patience. But as he turned to carry on into the stables, her answer floated after him and hit the back of his head like a brick.

"I want to sculpt you."

*

"What?!" Mindy hooted with laughter. "Sculpt you? *You?! Are you sure?*"

Nate smiled up into her face, "Hey, it's not such a crazy idea. I'm an icon in these parts, you know. But, yeah, that was pretty much my reaction too."

The two of them were sprawled on the dark brown, leatherette sofa in the "sitting" part of their bedsit. Mindy was legs up on the packing chest that served the two of them as coffee table and vinyl storage. Nate had his head in her lap and his legs

hooked over the arm rest opposite. Eastenders unwound on the television in front of them, largely unheeded.

“What was she, some sort of nut-job?” continued Mindy, still with amused incredulity.

“Mm, I’m not sure. Not entirely, although she did seem a little, um, out there. Very good-looking woman though. You’d better watch out.”

“How old?” asked his wife, curiously.

“Hard to tell. Younger than me, bit older than you, I reckon. Forty-ish, maybe? You wait,” he preened himself, “she’s bound to want me to pose in the nude. She won’t be able to resist.”

“Pfft!” Mindy snorted, “A spaz like you? I’ve got no worries. She’s probably one of those modern artists who make things out of cling film and old telephones. It’ll have some terribly serious but completely wrong angle on disability and won’t actually look anything like you. What on earth was she doing at the riding school anyway?”

“She happened to see me riding Loveflower. Apparently, she’s friends with one of the instructors.” Now it was Nate’s turn to snort. “She was getting some advice about her two horses that she can’t actually ride.”

Mindy raised her eyebrows, “Bloody expensive things just to keep as ornaments. She loaded?”

“Dunno. Could be. She certainly talks posh enough.”

“Ohhh, one of those.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. A rich wife. Husband earns a shitload but never actually comes home so bored wife dabbles in whatever expensive hobby she happens to fancy this week. I see them every day at the gym. They always turn up in a big lump of Juicy Couture, just after nine o’clock. Once they’ve got shot of the kids.”

Nate was thoughtful for a moment.

“No, I don’t think so. Whatever she is, I don’t think she’s just a dabbler.” He got up from the sofa and rootled through his rucksack, which he’d dumped on the kitchen table. “Look, she gave me this. Said it was all she had on her.”

He handed his wife a battered postcard. Mindy took it, glanced at it and then sat up straight.

“Bloody hell, is this hers? This what she does?”

“I guess so.” Nate sat down again beside his wife, heaved his own long legs onto the packing chest.

“Wow!” Mindy took a longer look at the two figures shown on the postcard. “They’re huge. And so beautiful.”

“Yes, I thought so too. No idea why she wants to sculpt me.”

“Oi!” his wife chided him sharply, “You’re gorgeous, Nate, you know you are. Believe me, I wish some of my clients put in a fraction of the effort you make. What are you going to do? Did you say yes?”

“Didn’t really say anything,” Nate confessed. “I’d had a rubbish sort of lesson and she’d managed to annoy me too so I just sort of glowered at her a bit.”

“Ah,” Mindy smiled slightly in recognition. “So that’s that?”

“I guess.”

“You stupid bastard.” Mindy pinched her husband affectionately and rested her head on his arm.

*

It was nearly two weeks later when it happened for the second time.

Tuesday morning and Nate was again at the Bureau. He had a whole day shift this time. A whole eight, freakin’ hours of it all. And there were two of them on today so he had to share the desk too. At least it was Mercy, who made him laugh, rather than Paul, who didn’t.

He didn’t really mind his job. It paid the bills - just about - and it let him exercise his considerable talents of both will and intelligence. Most of all, the Citizens Advisory Service, in his experience, was one of the few employers that genuinely practised the diversity dogma that so many others merely preached. Nate was under no illusions. Precious few other organisations would have seriously considered him for a job, particularly a job that meant dealing with the public.

In return, of course, the Service had got a bargain. Really, he was punching well below his weight. Like many people who are, in one way or another, outside the mainstream, he had had to settle for a post that was several levels below what he was actually capable of.

For years, he had harboured the idea that this was how the world had worked so well, through the ages. If you limit significant, perfectly-able sections of your population (women, say, or black people or the lower classes) to the menial tasks, then all the challenge and prestige is left for the elite. And everything will run beautifully because, every day, these vastly over-capable people are taking care of the tedious drudgery that the elite would simply not bother themselves about.

Of course, the whole thing starts to fall to pieces once equality approaches.

Nonetheless, in many ways, the job suited him very nicely. The division of each working day into two shifts made it easy for him to organise his timetable to accommodate his riding lessons, his long runs or Mindy's frequently unsociable hours. They tried to spend at least one end of every day together. No, he couldn't complain about the hours. There was nothing awful, not like a fireman or a nurse. No-one ever needed emergency Citizens Advice in the middle of the night or first thing on a Sunday morning.

But there was no getting away from the fact that a lot of the work was dull. There was a handful of key issues that cropped up pretty much every shift (benefit confusion, debt, housing and, increasingly, immigration issues) and Nate was more than able to deal with these on autopilot. So by eleven o'clock on this dreary Tuesday morning, he was urging the clock on to lunch time when he could get out for a jog around the perimeter of Mountsfield Park.

At about half past eleven, the door of the Bureau opened and a pale face, broad but angular, poked itself around.

"er, hello? I'm looking for someone..?"

He and Mercy stared at the face for a moment or two, long enough for the person attached to enter the office. Mercy, on the 'phone, jerked her head in Nate's direction.

As before, Rhiannon Hughes injected a shot of colour into a dull environment. Nate caught himself wondering if she lit up every room she entered. Her red hair topped a long, stretchy dress of broad white and navy blue stripes, which gave her a cheerful, nautical air. She approached the desk and grinned mischievously at him. All she needed was a sailor's hat, set to a jaunty angle.

"How the hell..?" he began.

She held her hands out placatingly.

"I know, I know and you can just tell me to fuck off if you want to, but, well, we didn't really get off to a tremendous start, did we?, and I'm not sure we ever really finished our conversation properly. I just thought I might try one more time.."

Nate sat back and appraised her coldly.

"How the hell did you find me here?" he said again.

"I know, I know. I really didn't explain myself very well, I know. Look, it's nearly lunchtime, isn't it? Tell you what, I'll go and sit in that pub just across the road. The Wheatsheaf, or something, isn't it? I'll be there until one o'clock. When it's your lunch break, come along if you want and I'll buy you a drink, if you want, and I'll try and explain it better. OK?"

She went back through the door and Nate was left feeling as if he'd just been visited by a friendly tornado.

Mercy raised her eyebrows.

“So, you going to go, lad?” was all she said. Dry to the point of aridity was Mercy. That was the thing Nate liked best about her.

“Nah, don’t think so.”

He wasn’t going to go. The London & Rye, that’s the pub she must have meant. It was a slightly dreggy Wetherspoon’s, just up a bit on the other side of the road. He knew it well, it was the easiest place for occasional after-work drinks on a Friday. They did a decent chilli chicken wrap for only a couple of quid, he could have that for lunch, save his own sandwiches for tomorrow. But no, he wasn’t going to go. She was a nutter, wasn’t she? A posh nutter with more money than sense, so far as he could see. She must have stalked him a bit, just to find him here. So no, he wasn’t going to go, was he?

He settled back down to complete the paperwork strewn across his desk. At ten to twelve, he filed the papers correctly, left the office and dodged the traffic across Rushey Green to The London & Rye.

*

She was sitting at the bar with a glass of red wine, laughing with the young server. When she saw him, she stood up. The large bag on her lap tumbled to the floor, spilling an assortment of detritus. Nate noticed a photo, a lipstick and a small pair of pliers among the coins and the crumpled tissues. He nodded to the barman.

“I’ll have a sparkling water, please.”

Rhiannon was bending over, retrieving her bag but her clear tones were audible enough.

“I’ll get this. You sure you don’t want a proper drink?”

She stood and heaved the bag onto her shoulder, ran her hands through her short, ruffled hair in a vain attempt to tidy it. He rebuffed her offer.

“I don’t drink at work. And I can get my own water, thanks.”

“Oh, no, of course. OK, well come on. Let’s sit down.”

She strode over to an unoccupied table and sat down. Nate followed with his water and sat opposite her. She was furtling in her bag for something, checking her 'phone, sipping her wine. He said nothing but leaned forward to pick up his glass, waited for her to start.

“Oh..” she said.

He kept his face deadpan.

“What?”

“You’ve..you’ve got no thumbs.”

“Yes. I know.”

“So, how do you..you know, how do you, I don’t know, write or do your buttons or anything really?”

“I’ve got superhuman fucking fingers. Your point?”

She smiled at this and seemed to relax a bit.

“How *did* you find me anyway?”

“Oh, you know,” she answered vaguely, “I asked a few people who asked a few people. It wasn’t difficult.”

“Why?”

As she started to answer, her shifting gaze and slight unease appeared to retreat.

“It’s like I said at the riding school,” she began. “I really, really want to sculpt you. Look..” she finally wrestled a classy brochure out of her bag. “This is what I do. Take it, you’ll see. What really turns me on is *movement*. The physical form using its own strength to make beautiful movement.”

Nate looked through the brochure, acutely conscious of her gaze as she watched his fingers handle the thick, expensive pages. It was full of stunning images. Some traditional statues of important-looking figures, plus some more modern works in what he took to be steel. As she had said, many showed muscular figures engaged in physical activity - sailing, ballet, football. The sense of movement portrayed was powerful. Nate had little interest in art but, as far as he was any judge, these were beautiful.

“Why me?”

She was ferreting through her bag again but she answered readily enough.

“What I’d really like to do is a model of you on that gorgeous horse. I really do love horses, even if I can’t ride yet, they’re such a perfect meld of grace and power. The two of you looked amazing together, so completely in tune. It was hard to see where she ended and you started, if you know what I mean.”

She unearthed a blue inhaler from her bag and took a couple of puffs. Nate considered her words for a moment or two, thinking back to that particular lesson with Loveflower. His disability antenna - that exquisitely sensitive instrument - was quivering violently.

“And the fact that I’m clearly thalidomide has got nothing to do with it, of course?”

She had the grace to blush but remained earnest and, it seemed, perfectly sincere.

"I wouldn't say it had *nothing* to do with it. Look," she gestured at the brochure he was still holding. "I'm good, I'm really good but I've kind of reached the limits of my recent work. I can do you a normal..um..an elite athlete all day long, better than anyone else. I need a new challenge. I've never seen anyone with your particular anatomy do what you did. Honestly? I didn't even realise it could be done. I really want to see if I can re-create that in a way that is both true *and* beautiful."

She drained her glass and got up to go to the bar.

"Another?"

"No, you're OK," he smiled slightly for the first time, "thanks."

"OK, I'll get a coffee while you think about it a bit."

She returned three or four minutes later with a cup of unappealing, thick beige fluid. She sat back down, took a sip and grimaced briefly.

"Well, what do you think? Shall we do this?"

Nate was silent for a second or two, his mouth twisted uncertainly, brow drawn down.

"What would it involve?" he asked, eventually.

"Oh. Well, that's the good bit." she said, eagerly. "Since I want both you and Loveflower, in action too, there wouldn't be any tedious sitting around posing for hours. I'd have to do it from photos. I'd probably come to one or two of your riding sessions, take some pictures, maybe a video and we could get together and settle on the best image."

"Which sort would you do?"

"What do you mean?"

Nate gestured at the brochure.

"Well, you've got two different types in there. The dark ones that look like real statues and then the silvery ones that are a bit more abstract."

Rhiannon considered the question.

"I think," she started, "I *think* that I'd model you both first in clay, realistically, I know what you mean. My gut feeling is that it would make a stunning, life-sized bronze. But the model might lead me somewhere else." Suddenly, she threw him a dazzling smile. "That's the best bit of the creative process, you know, you can never really be quite sure where it will go."

Nate was still doubtful.

“How much would it cost me?”

Rhiannon hastened to correct his impression.

“No, no, no. Nothing at all. I’m not looking for a commission. I’m doing this for me, I think its essential for my development. Maybe a bit of time and maybe a trip or two down to my studio. But I’d pay your expenses. Come on, it’d be fun. What do you say?”

Nat considered again, deep in thought. “No,” he said slowly, “no, I don’t think so.”

She was crestfallen. “Why not?”

He shrugged. “Do I need a reason?”

"Well, no, of course not. But it would help me understand," she replied. "I mean, did I say something awful? I'm always opening my mouth too wide, I know that. I get so excited about things that are important to me."

He picked up his empty water glass and stood.

"No, not really. It's just that.."

"What?"

"I don't like you."

He left.

*

It was quiet in the Bureau that afternoon. Nate came back from the pub, got changed and went out for his run, all without saying a word. Afterwards, looking at his face, Mercy judged discretion to be the better part of valour and kept conversation to a bare minimum.

At about four o’clock, a young man came into the office. Nate recognised him as the barman from The London & Rye who had served him earlier.

“You left this. Thought I’d drop it in.”

“Ah, er, thanks.”

“No worries, I’m on my way home anyway.”

The young man went out and Nate was left holding the brochure of Rhiannon’s beautiful sculptures.

Chapter Three

The start of our Sixth Form years saw us disperse somewhat. To be more accurate, it saw my enforced splintering from the main group. Rhiannon and most of my other friends moved, *en bloc*, onto another school in Rochester. A bigger, more illustrious boys' school - a minor public school, in fact - that took girls into the Sixth Form. I went to the local girls' grammar. It was impossible to raise a justifiable opposition to the plan (not that it would have made any difference). The school was within walking distance from my house and had perfectly decent A level results in all the Sciences. I hated it.

I hated it because, in the end, I had loved the Convent of the Poor Clares. I hated it because, once again, I was the wrong person in the wrong place with no idea what to say. I hated it because in this enormous Sixth Form, it really did matter what sort of clothes you wore and I had no money. I hated it because my rampaging younger sister was already established there and already notorious - Tucker Jenkins in a grey skirt. Fair dos to her, really, it was her turn. I hated it because all the the other girls were so ordinary and so pretty.

I don't remember how hard I tried. Not very, I suspect, but probably harder than I would bother to now. These days, I rarely make the effort to talk to new people. It's not that I'm shy, not especially. It's not even that I'm misanthropic. I find most people perfectly pleasant. The trouble is that I'm depleted by encounters with others. Over the years, that's a whole heap of depletion. One gets tired.

I'll tell you how it goes, how it always goes. The other person starts talking and I'm polite enough to give them due attention. I'm perpetually staggered by how many people seem to be in such desperate need of attention. They suck it out of me like marrow from a shin bone. Maybe my particular brand of attention is especially rewarding, or maybe that's just the kind of person I latch on to. I do seem to surround myself with high-functioning fuck-ups. They flock to me. You'll have heard of RADAR and, probably, GAYDAR? I appear to have FUDAR.

But people assume that my attention is free. That it costs me nothing to give. That it doesn't require continual plunder of my intellectual and emotional stores to attend to them. "To pay attention" is no mere figure of speech, it costs me dear. I wouldn't mind if there were a return in it. But so few people are funny enough, considerate enough, original enough, loyal enough, what you will, to justify my expense.

Over the years I've come to the conclusion that not many are worth the price they exact, so I've largely stopped bothering. Just now and again, I come across some high quality soul for whom any effort is worthwhile but I can count them on one hand. Can count them on, hmm, three fingers, to be truthful.

In the autumn of 1983, there was no-one at my new school really worth the effort. No-one available, at any rate. That's the trouble with turning up late. The best seats are inevitably taken. I did make one friend - Becca - and I'm grateful to her, up to a point. She saved me from a couple of years of complete solitude. But, my God, she certainly proved to be a fuck-up of the first order. It took me the next twenty years to get unstuck from her, I still feel guilty about it.

By the middle of the second term, I was settling (fairly sullenly, it has to be said) on the fringes of the fringe. Now that I look at it again, I couldn't really have got any further out without breaking orbit altogether. Becca and I adhered loosely to one of the peripheral groups of the Sixth Form. This one was composed of the hippies and the amiably, earnestly religious. We two were neither of those things but the group was flexible enough to encompass us as nearby satellites. Certainly, Becca and I would never have managed to stick to the In-Crowd. We couldn't manage to be properly In with the Outsiders, let alone the really core nucleus of the Sixth Form.

I've never really wanted to be In with the In-Crowd. At least, I don't think I have. It always reeks to me of the lowest common denominator. I used to get stuck to hippies a lot, although I've never really been a hippy, not a proper one. Inhaling anything - wacky or otherwise - rapidly makes me sick. I do occasionally wonder what would have happened to me socially had I started off down an Arts/Humanities path rather than a Science one. I could have done it. At least, I had the ability for it. The choice was never really there for me though. In all likelihood, I would simply have failed to fit in with a different group of people, that's all.

But I'm making it sound worse than it was. A level Science (in my case, the classic pre-med combo of Physics, Chemistry and Biology) may involve many evenings of mindless rote work but some of it is very interesting indeed. For the first few months, I would do my homework with a wondrous sense that I was diving deep into worlds that had always surrounded me but which had been hitherto invisible.

That feeling can occasionally surface even now, although with time has come the realisation that I - me, personally - can never really know the whole truth about anything. I'm clever. I'm not a genius. At some point, you realise that, at each increasing level, the "facts" you are being fed are merely children's primers of the truth. All those whizzy electrons circling the mass particles in their twos and eights.

Eventually, for the sake of time, for the sake of sanity, for the sake of passing the exams, for the sake of simply getting on with the job, you have to draw a line. You have to say:

"This much truth I know. This is the way that I am able to hold it in my head, although I know it isn't the whole truth or even the correct truth."

This certainly applies to my own field of Anaesthesia, which no-one at all claims fully to understand. It is still so much witchcraft. The rest, I am happy to leave to..to leave to whom, exactly? To God? Not to God. To those cleverer and more curious than I, I suppose.

So the academic portion of my Sixth Form life was satisfactory, at least. Despite coming from the Convent (which really was deficient in some important respects), I was clever enough to cope and settled, without excessive effort, at or near the top of my classes.

I also discovered the one good thing about being uprooted and then repotted in foreign soil - the clean slate. No-one in my new school knew what I was supposed to be. I could, within limits, choose how to portray myself.

What did I choose? I chose to be clever, individual, a touch flamboyant even, not necessarily pretty but occasionally hitting beauty of a sort, almost compulsively non-mainstream (although so very, very far away from rebellious), Science rather than Art, inside rather than outside. As I said, within limits. Compared to many in the circle where I loitered, I managed to come across as both out-going and sure of myself. It seems it *is* possible to fool an awful lot of the people for an awful lot of the time.

*

In the meantime, what of Rhiannon and my other friends from the Convent? They appeared to me to be leading lives of unparalleled interest and glamour, studying Arts and Languages and Philosophies in a venerable establishment. Surrounded by the beauty and history of Rochester, they were busy weaving their own histories into the fabric of one of the oldest schools in the country.

Rhiannon was taking Art, French and English at A level. I remember that she had a bit of a dither about whether or not to take Art. Should she do History instead? Her innate talent was so obvious to me that I found this indecision oddly dissonant. I can still remember her O level painting. It was a Portrait of a Worried Man, sitting at a table chewing his fingertips; her father modelled for it. Anyway, the dither didn't last long.

It was, I think, early on during our Sixth Form days that I first heard Rhiannon talk about her growing attraction to sculpture, as an art form. I imagine the inclination had been with her rather longer than that. She started to talk about lumps of material - stone, clay - and of wanting to reveal the shapes she could see within. She would say that whenever she saw a picture, she felt frustrated because she always wanted to walk around and look at the back of it.

As with most of Rhiannon's ideas, the notion was vast in scope but not stupid-crazy. The family talent had flowed through into her, rather than her brother. Furthermore, she had watched for nearly two decades while her father worked hard and then harder to use his own portion of that talent. To this useful combination of ability and application, she brought her own fierce ambition and an acute sense of performance. Sculpture, that most demonstrative of the visual arts, made perfect sense.

It was to be a few years before she could put the plan formally into action.

*

Despite my sullenness, my social life also started to improve. My O level money got me - at last, at last! - a pair of contact lenses. They were the rigid sort which were all astigmatics could hope for in 1983, but I learnt to tolerate them in record time. My father grudgingly and unevenly pierced my ears for me. I had minimal pocket money and no hope at all of a Saturday job but I discovered second hand chic and a certain amount of necessary ingenuity. Suddenly, I found myself bouncing between two parallel but utterly disparate bumpers. As usual, I wasn't quite comfortable at either.

Towards the end of our Lower Sixth year, I went with Rhiannon to the summer fête at her school. I don't recall now but no doubt it was called "The Great Estival Extravagance" or something equally histrionic, to wash a sheen of gravitas over what was actually just a money-making exercise.

I was starting to enjoy this sort of thing. It was a sunny day and the grounds of the school were smoothly expansive. The place appeared to have an awful lot of green sward. I was wearing clothes that made me feel knowingly individual (I remember a certain amount of block fuchsia. It was 1984, after all), my beloved grey eye-liner and some surreptitious lipstick. It was undeniably sophisticated to be grasping the stem of a flute of sparkling wine although, even then, it seemed a shame that the vessel was plastic and the wine warm demi-sec.

Somehow, I ended up talking to Rhiannon's Aunty Gwen. This Aunt asked Rhiannon to go and ferret out her husband, thus Gwen and I were left alone for a few minutes. Gwen Rossiter was Rhiannon's father's sister, her husband a successful solicitor. They had two children (an older boy and a younger girl, naturally) and an enormous old house in a highly desirable part of rural Kent. Gwen must have been fifty-ish, I suppose, at this point. She was a thin, brittle, preserved-in-aspic sort of woman, whom I had met a few times and didn't much like. I may have been overly-influenced in this by Rhiannon (who also didn't like her much) but I don't think so. I think Rhiannon was right.

On this particular occasion, however, Gwen was uncharacteristically pleasant. It was the first time she had seen me in some months and she was quite fulsome about the all-round improvement in my appearance. She was still talking when Rhiannon re-appeared with her Uncle Jack in tow.

"Hello, everyone," started Uncle Jack genially as he handed round some more fully-charged plastic flutes. "What are you two ladies yacking about?"

"Mrs Rossiter has just been telling me how ugly I used to be," I remarked drily.

I think that's the rudest I've ever been to anyone in my life.

But the point had been rather hammered into me over the preceding months. Compliments can be unwittingly double-edged. A number of my old acquaintances had registered surprise at my apparent overnight transformation. The Ugly Duckling had turned Swan, against all the odds. My good friends either had better tact or better perception. I still saw them frequently enough, I suppose, that the changes we were all effecting on ourselves appeared spectral rather than quantum.

*

In stark contrast to the Great Estival Extravagance, I remember a party given by one of the amiably religious of my new school. Fifteen or so of us, dancing in a living room to The Weather Girls. The imaginations seemed to me as grey and narrow as the skirts, the conversation as limited as the alcohol.

It seemed that I could be uncomfortable and disdainful at both bumpers, with both the self-centredly grandiose and the cheerfully parochial. It is an unpleasant habit that surfaces occasionally - my ability to despise everyone I know, without exception. I try to be fair, I don't generalise; everyone falls short in their own unique way.

*

Of course, Sixth Form isn't only about ticking a neat row of academic boxes. Whether people liked it or not, it was unavoidable that we girls would start to explore the wider world, with all its potential for glory and for catastrophe.

During our Lower Sixth year, I'd managed a few clandestine dates, snogged a couple of young men but, thus far, no-one had really sparked my flint. Rhiannon, of course, had been exploring these areas for rather longer than I. Superficially, at least, she appeared streets ahead of me.

Rosso had gently, inevitably, faded into the background but she found no shortage of interesting potential successors. She had the advantage that she was now attending a mixed school. Her opportunities were that much more frequent and her flint appeared to spark more readily and more fiercely than mine.

There were two young men in her year called John. John Kearney and John Hughes. John Hughes initially set her alight quite brightly but, for some reason, their planets did not quite align and it all came to naught. Eventually, it was John Kearney at whom she set her cap and with whom she shared such a tumultuous couple of years.

It didn't take me as long as you might imagine to catch up. During the summer holiday of 1984, I finally achieved that most unequivocal benchmark of social success - I got myself a serious boyfriend.

In that first summer term, I had won a prize. There are, occasionally, unexpected benefits to being clever. I won a place on the London International Youth Science Forum. Two weeks - two unrestrained and unobserved weeks, in London, in July. It was a prize, a prestigious educational prize. No-one could possibly object or veto it.

I stayed - along with a hundred or so others - in Charlotte Street, in an empty hall of residence. On the very first evening, as we all mustered for dinner in the refectory, Jimmy picked me. He came straight at me, almost as if he wanted to get there before anybody else could. He proved to be a nice enough lad. Tall, Scots and red-headed - none of which should be held against him. He went on to be a quantity surveyor, as far as I know. Eventually, I would be briefly engaged to him, although that ended abruptly as soon as I met the real man in my life.

Jimmy - a year older - was the first man I ever slept with. Please note: *slept with*. Not: *had sex with*. That was his idea, rather than mine. I was seventeen years old and felt it was about time, frankly. But he decided against it. He had some misplaced notion of decency, seemed to think that he would, somehow, be taking advantage. Come to think of it, he may just have been nervous. I assumed, of course I did, that I was the last person of my generation still intact. But I may have been wrong.

For the second of those two weeks, we would get naked (or nearly) and leap into one of our tiny single beds and somehow, somehow, not actually have sex. That was on the nights that we went to bed at all. We were young and we had London spread at our feet. Once or twice, during that fortnight, we saw the clock around.

Thirty years, countless night shifts and one small child later, that particular freedom has lost a lot of its glamour. These days, I subscribe to the view that I once heard propounded

on television: you know you're finally a proper grown-up when, at any given moment, you'd rather be asleep.

Today, the last remaining trace of that wonderful fortnight is a tiny but ever-perplexing conundrum. How to answer that perennial girls'-talk question: who was the first person you slept with? What is always meant, of course, is: who was the first person you had sex with? I never know exactly what to say. To answer accurately becomes rather tedious, I've discovered.

For nearly two years afterwards, Jimmy and I conducted a surprisingly successful long-distance relationship. This was more than a decade before anyone had heard of email but we sent letters, exchanged a weekly telephone call and, just now and again, managed to meet somewhere for an afternoon.

Despite our widening social activity, Rhiannon and I still spent a significant proportion of our free time together. Over the Christmas period of 1984, I took her to the theatre. In 1985, both Rhiannon and I would turn eighteen. She is five months older than I, her birthday straddles the Cusp of Capricorn and Aquarius. It also happens to be St Sebastian's Day. She was ecstatic about her connection to this icon of perfect male flesh and would occasionally remind us that, had she been born a boy, her parents would have named her for the saint. Instead, she took his name on the occasion of her confirmation.

A couple of months before her coming of age, I noticed that Ian McKellan (just plain "mister" at that point) was to be at the Barbican Centre after Christmas, performing extracts from Shakespeare. This struck me as an ideal, if slightly early, eighteenth birthday present for Rhiannon. It also struck me that I would probably enjoy it too, if I bought two tickets and persuaded my father to drive us there and back. He would be unlikely to refuse such an altruistic request which - a welcome bonus - got him out of the house for a whole evening.

We had a lovely evening. We chattered all the way up, listened to Mr McKellan's enthralling tones for a couple of hours before chattering all the way back again. I don't know what my father did in the interim. It didn't occur to me then to wonder about it. I imagine he stayed in the rather nice bar with a newspaper and had slightly too much to drink.

The climax of the performance was Hamlet's famous soliloquy. As McKellan declaimed "'tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep.." Rhiannon leant over to me and smirked lasciviously:

"Did you know that the Elizabethans used 'die' to mean 'have an orgasm'?"

I didn't know, of course. How could I? There was no possible way, however much lateral thinking one applied, that Elizabethan sex slang could find its way into any of my classes, not even Biology. I grinned at her uncertainly and turned my attention back to the stage.

*

Our two Sixth Form years went eventually by. Rhiannon and I flourished, I think, in both ability and outlook. We chose our paths and made our plans. I should say better, perhaps, that plans were made. Rhiannon got a place at the City and Guilds of London Art School to study Fine Art Sculpture. I was accepted into my father's Alma Mater, King's College

Medical School, London University. It was perfect; I could live with my grandmother in Camden Town and save a fortune. Life, glittering, stretched ahead of us.

In that summer of 1985, we thought, we both thought, that the only things that stood between us and the lives we wanted were our A levels.

Chapter Four

On April 14th, 1986, Rhiannon had a baby.

I don't *think* that was part of the plan. Rhiannon adores children almost as much as she adores animals but still, I'm pretty sure that wasn't supposed to happen at that exact juncture.

It was John's, of course. John Kearney, I mean, not John Hughes. John Kearney was a short, stocky lad with a lot of curly hair. He looked almost archetypically Celtic, in that dark, brooding, coarse-featured way that Kevin Rowland had used to such good effect a few years earlier. John and Rhiannon had got together sometime in the Lower Sixth and were pretty serious about each other, as far as I could see.

He lived in the same town as I did, not that I'd known him prior to his hooking up with Rhiannon. His parents had a large, sprawling house near the library, much more centrally situated than our big lump of late Victorian red brick. The house suited John's large, sprawling family, full of biological and non-biological children. There was at least one Irish wolfhound. There may have been two, I was never entirely sure.

I liked John a lot. He was cool and funny and sarcastic, with a wide smile that turned him back into a child. Rhiannon's parents, on the other hand, were not quite so keen.

At the time, I thought they were just being stereotypically protective. No-one could ever be good enough for their adored elder child. Certainly, they had not liked any of her previous fancies. Rhiannon had hoped, in vain, that since John was at least approximately white British, they might have been more kindly disposed towards him.

“They think he's a slacker,” she confided to me, one evening. “They don't reckon he'll ever apply himself to anything properly.”

In the Williams' household, that was the biggest sin of all.

I'm not sure how they knew. We were all seventeen, eighteen. All just about to disperse to one university or another. How could you tell, at that moment, which of us would keep pushing onwards and which of us would meander through life, taking the line of least resistance? But they were right about John.

Turn and turn about, John's parents didn't like Rhiannon either. I never understood that; how could you not love Rhiannon?

They were unlucky, these two. They'd more or less behaved themselves all the way through the Sixth Form, behaved themselves far better than their parents had any right to expect. Then one night, just one night, after an end-of-A-levels celebration...bingo! Mammalian physiology can be devastatingly efficient sometimes. They were both eighteen and both Catholic, after all.

The way Rhiannon tells it, she didn't twig for ages. I can remember one last glorious September day at the seaside, Sussex somewhere. Rhiannon and me and Jamie plus a couple of cousins, I think. We were paddling and digging and haring about childishly on the sands. Rhiannon, I recall, was in pink shorts and a baggy pink shirt.

“You’re putting on weight, girl,” remarked her mother, caustically, from her spread blanket.

Rhiannon didn’t seem bothered. She clowned and preened a bit, ran her hands over her strapping physique.

“Too many post-exam parties. It’ll settle down when I’m a penniless student in London and can’t afford to eat.”

She looked magnificent. She suffered no sickness or tiredness then or later. I remember her telling me, ten years on, that she simply felt incredibly *strong*. As if she could lift houses.

I found this hard to credit, at the time, that you could manage not to know for so many months. But I’ve since seen it in every obstetric unit where I’ve ever worked. Ignorance, irregularity, hope, denial, blissful oblivion. Call it what you will.

The lateness of the diagnosis did, at least, mean that one difficult decision was circumvented. Rhiannon and John were the two Catholic offspring of four very Catholic parents. I don’t think they would have proceeded any differently but the dates meant that, really, there wasn’t even a discussion to be had. The two of them were determined that they were going to have this baby and that they would make it work together.

They didn’t stand a chance. Nineteen years old (at the end), no useful qualifications, no income and their four parents all dead set against the union. They didn’t stand a chance in hell.

I’m not sure exactly how the inevitable rupture was achieved. It was quite late on, maybe even shortly after the birth. No, it must have been before the birth because of the name. The new baby was going to be called John James after father and uncle. In the end, the John was dropped and my godson has always been James, in one guise or other. James, Jimmy, Jameson, The Jameson, The Jimson he gets variably called.

All I know is that things got more and more acrimonious for a number of weeks before James was born. I could never pin down a reason for it. I couldn’t understand how Rhiannon and John, who had no real quarrel with each other, somehow split up.

There are a lot of things from that period that I don’t understand or simply don’t know.

I don’t understand why, shortly after the birth, Rhiannon moved out of the family home into a small flat above a hairdresser’s nearby. Just her and James. She was not estranged from her parents, far from it. I mean, they hadn’t been delighted about all this but they certainly hadn’t disowned her.

I don’t know how she afforded it. She was a single mother, there would have been certain benefits she could claim, I suppose. Anyway, it was quite a nice little flat. She threw some great parties there.

I don't know how she squared things with the City and Guilds lot. Deferred entry of some sort, aided, no doubt, by her superlative Art A level result. She did eventually take up her place three years later.

What I really, *really* don't understand is where Vik appeared from, shortly after all these dramatic events.

Whatever I may or may not have known or understood, the one fact is indisputable. On April 14th, 1986, Rhiannon gave birth to James, with the help of her mother and without the help, so I understand, of any pain relief whatsoever.

She asked me to be godmother. This was eighteen months or so before my flickering faith sputtered out altogether so I could happily accept without too obstructive a sense of hypocrisy. I scoured the two or three jewellers in town for an appropriate baptismal gift compatible with my budget. In the end, I bought James a small silver crucifix on a coarse silver chain. Even as I paid for it, I could see it was cheap and pretty nasty.

You may be wondering about the dates. In the spring of 1986, surely I was gadding about the glittering metropolis as a shiny new medical student? What was I doing, buying bog-quality silver jewellery from a dismal branch of H. Samuel in my dismal home town?

Things had not rolled out completely smoothly for me either.

*

On the second Thursday of August 1985, I tore open a small brown envelope and read my A level results. Among other things, I read a 'D' for Biology. That was not going to cut it. That was not going to get me out of the house and up to London. For four years, at least, I had lain on my bed most evenings and dreamed of the day when I could legitimately leave the house and go somewhere else.

I tried, believe me, I tried. I rang thirty medical schools in one morning to see if anyone had a Clearing place to give me. I suggested to my mother that perhaps I might find a Physics course instead but that idea was never given any oxygen.

"Do you *really* want to do something different, Sara?"

My father unearthed me in my bedroom when he found out I was thinking of changing tack. I could hear the panic rising in his voice as he asked the question. I didn't understand it, at the time.

"Well..no..I suppose, but everyone says it's sensible to have a back-up plan."

Anyway, like I said, the idea was never given any oxygen.

That accursed 'D' must have been a massive loss of face to my parents. My father, no doubt, explained it plausibly away to his surgical colleagues. My mother certainly hit upon a foolproof way of making light of it. She took to laughing and telling people that I'd been distracted by *lerve*. I was still conducting my long distance relationship

with Jimmy, at that point. In some respects, it was the ideal romance for a dutiful daughter who was supposed to be studying hard.

This irritated the tits off me, of course. It had nothing to do with Jimmy. I was more inclined to blame the conditions in the house. Always combustible, the atmosphere had ignited into a battery of polymorphic explosions right around the time of my exams. It irked me that my mother appeared, wilfully, not to make the connection. I didn't say anything though. Actually, I think I was wrong too.

Anyway, back to school I went. There wasn't really anything else I could do. Back to a school which even the few people I liked had already left. Becca had gone to do Physiology at Aberystwyth. In the following January, I sat A level Biology for the second time and, frankly, aced it. Well, I had nothing much else to do and almost nobody else to talk to.

At some point during that superfluous year, I quietly stopped looking to London. On the face of it, I'd decided that I wanted to be nearer Jimmy, so I applied to a bunch of northern universities. In truth, I think some nascent survival sense had finally stirred within me and started hauling at the fire bell.

*

In the autumn and winter of 1985, it felt to me (as it must, undoubtedly, have felt to Rhiannon, too) that life had blown up in my face. Life, as it is wont to do, made absolutely no concessions to my distress but trundled on regardless. In its own time, it eventually provided both of us with ample compensations.

For Rhiannon, the biggest compensation was, simply and overwhelmingly, James. From the moment he was born, he became a treasured son, nephew and grandson - the golden child at the centre of his mother's Universe.

"I just love the smell of his head."

This statement, frequently reiterated, would be accompanied by Rhiannon inhaling the essence of her new child as hard as she could.

James well-deserved this adoration. He was a sunny soul, always laughing, always happy when you laughed with him. As a young child, he was almost preternaturally cherubic - blond, curly-haired, endearingly mischievous.

His mother, naturally enough, took to drawing him on a regular basis. So delicious were the results, that Rhiannon and her father occasionally used them as templates. Around the turn of the decade, if anyone in the North Kent area needed a plaster cherub, then what they got was James. As naked and smiling as the day he was born.

You can still find one or two of these effigies, if you know where to look. I always regard it as a measure of my godson's appealing equanimity that he has never really seemed bothered by the fact.

Rhiannon's other compensation, I suppose, was Vik. Does Vik Fernandes count as compensation? I'm not entirely sure. He was a persistent presence in her life for a

number of years so she must have got *something* out of the relationship. I could never really see what it was, though. The pair of them didn't appear to get on that well. Rhiannon was certainly never quite sure of him. She often seemed, even, not to like him all that much. For the whole length of their relationship, she was either talking about calling it off or telling me how she was sure he was about to.

I don't know how they came to meet. It had something to do with his sister. Said sister - Berenice - was considerably younger than us and was making her way through the Convent of the Poor Clares. However Rhiannon had happened to chance upon Berenice, she was immediately smitten with the dark, curly-haired beauty of the younger girl. I imagine she was delighted to discover that Berenice's older brother looked equally toothsome.

Vik and Berenice were certainly a good-looking pair of hybrids - half Irish, half Keralan. Vik, thin and rather nervy, was in a Sixth Form somewhere in the Medway area. He had his eyes on a place at one of the London dental schools. For him, all went according to plan and in due course, he went up to the capital exactly as he had mapped out.

Even when he was in London and she was in Kent, the relationship zig-zagged on. Rhiannon took up her own deferred place a year later, which must have made things easier.

Before she went up to Art School, Rhiannon had some work done. I came to see her in that little flat during one of my brief visits home and she twirled in front of me, hands on hips.

"How do I look?" She was teasing me somehow.

"er, fine. Really well."

She did. She always did. She kept twirling.

"Notice anything different?" Still teasing.

"um, is that a new shirt?"

She gave up, exasperated at my lack of discernment.

"No, you twonk. It's the body that's new, not the shirt. I've had a mastopexy."

"A boob job?" I asked in some surprise. "Why?"

"Spaniels' ears," she replied, looking down at her new breasts, comically woebegone. "After being pregnant and then breast-feeding, that's all I had left. Little saggy spaniels' ears."

"Wow, a boob job." This needed thinking about. "Did it hurt?"

She nodded, wrinkling her nose.

"Hurt like the buggery-fuck. Worth it, though." She visibly brightened, "You know, however crap a day I'm having, I just think to myself 'But I've got a great pair of tits' and suddenly nothing else seems to matter that much."

I wasn't wholly convinced by this but, hey, they were her tits, I suppose.

"Where d'you have it done?"

The hospitals in the local area had been my playground, of sorts, since early childhood. But I'd never been a patient in any of them.

"The Alexandra, that hospital in Walderslade."

I knew the one she meant; it wasn't one I was familiar with.

"Ooh, the private hospital. How on earth did you afford that?"

She chucked the answer out casually, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

"Oh that's OK. Vik lent me the money. I'll pay him back in a bit."

Like I said, an odd relationship. I don't know. Maybe it's me.

*

I took and passed my Biology resit in the third week of January, 1986. That was a busy week. Exam papers on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and then I took my driving test on the Friday.

Suddenly, there was a great..big..gap. My applications to a clutch of medical schools had already gone in. There was nothing more I could do until I had my results and the interviews, offers or rejections started rolling in. For one of the few times in my life, I had no goal to head towards, nothing to strive for, nothing to achieve.

It was odd. More than that, it was *fun!* I applied for, and got, a short term job as a laboratory technician. There was a large agrochemical plant on the northern edge of my town. That and the paper mill were the two major local employers. They've both gone now.

The lab job was OK. It was mainly grunt work, pretty dull. I had to burn, in meticulously-measured aliquots, an awful lot of rat shit. But it came complete with a ready-made community and, to me, untold gold in the form of my weekly pay packet. An actual packet with real money in it. The place was full of university students on their sandwich year (does anyone still talk about sandwich years? On their year out in industry is what I mean) and the young professionals who were their bosses and supervisors.

These young adults appeared impossibly glamorous to me. They lived in their own digs, some of them were even cohabiting; they had cars or motor cycles. They drank beer, smoked cigarettes and the occasional joint, had maybe tried some speed or a tab or two of LSD (E hadn't really arrived at that point and nobody could yet afford cocaine). To my gratified amazement, they also appeared perfectly happy to welcome

me instantly into their midst. I heard, some time later, that I quickly got labelled as the classy bit of stuff. I'm not really sure I warranted that accolade more than anyone else.

That six months is the closest I've ever come to being In with the In-Crowd. I don't think I've ever subsequently repeated the experience. There was a large and active social club where I was always sure to find a bunch of people I could talk to and I had cash enough to buy my own rounds too.

Furthermore, there was Robin.

Robin Jackson was a Physics undergrad - tall and narrow with a beard and a mane of impossibly dark and curly hair. Hawk-eyed and acerbic, he was the most dazzling member of that whole, bewitching bunch. Finally, here was my idea of a Greek god.

Actually, no. He isn't. If you asked me to describe a classical deity, then I'm pretty sure I wouldn't describe Robin. It turns out that I'm not really all that interested in Greek gods. But I was definitely interested in Robin.

At the end of March, when I'd been part of this engulfing new world for about six weeks, I had an interview at Glasgow University. I took the train up to Scotland and Jimmy came across from Fife to meet me.

I never even got out of the station. In a dreary café, I took the silver St Christopher from around my neck, handed it back to Jimmy and tearfully, but definitely, ended it. I got on the next train back down south and never went near the University. I got into sort-of-trouble for that. It wasn't completely my fault. People should stick to agreed arrangements.

Robin and I started going out five days after Rhiannon gave birth to James. Life was compensating us in tandem, it seems. Twenty seven years later, James is still going strong. As are Rob and I. So I guess a bit of sort-of-trouble was worth it.

My lab job finished at the end of August. Robin and I had a month or so before the start of term. We had an idyllic, bucolic few weeks picking potatoes and apples together in the summer sunshine and then he went back up to Salford University.

The very next day, I fled to Sheffield and have never, really, come back.

*

Things started to happen, once I'd gone.

My mother left my father. My father tried to divorce my mother on the grounds of mental instability. My mother retaliated by citing his intractable adultery. In the end, a couple of level-headed solicitors persuaded them simply to spend two years apart.

My brother - then at North Thames Polytechnic - never took his degree. Instead, he barricaded himself in his bedroom for the next few years until he managed to find a job in Surrey, whereupon he bolted.

My sister also had a baby when she was nineteen. The first of her two beautiful daughters. A few months after the birth, she married the father, a man who would later beat her. My mother ordered the photos strategically in the album.

Both my parents married again the minute their *decree absolute* was through. They married replicas of each other. I have no idea why they bothered getting divorced at all.

My father and his new wife sold up and moved to Italy. They left, collectively, five children behind them. The youngest was twenty.

I fled to Sheffield and have never, really, come back. But I wish I'd been there for my sister. No-one else was.

*

Rhiannon had to wait another couple of years. She eventually went up in the autumn of 1988, taking James with her. She was busy enough in the interim. Small children are naturally high maintenance, after all. She also had the vicissitudes of her relationship with Vik to keep her on her toes.

She got heavily involved with the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children for a while. It was after I'd gone; I don't know - I don't wish to know - how far they managed to suck her in. She stuck with SPUC for a couple of years but her activity with them faded naturally enough as she got dug into her course in London.

So the two of us got out-of-sync for a time. It didn't last. Our divergent tracks soon ran parallel again, if, perhaps, rather further apart than before. In the summer of 1991, we both graduated, with aplomb, from our respective schools and headed out into the world.

Chapter Five

Nate's bad mood continued into that Tuesday evening. He banged about the kitchen area, sorting the dinner while Mindy sat at the table with earbuds in, typing into their cronky old laptop. She was coming to the end of her Level 4 Diploma and currently engaged in a desperate race to get a lengthy dissertation written before the submission date.

Nate knew he wasn't really helping but he didn't feel like easing up. Eventually, Mindy pulled the buds out of her head and sat back in her chair.

"Nate, what's up?"

He said nothing, continued to prepare their meal in much the same way that a Neanderthal would have prepared a mammoth. Mindy shook her head.

"OK, have it your way."

She reinserted her earphones and went back to the keyboard. After another five minutes or so, Nate clattered down the knife and came to sit beside her. He nudged her arm. She looked at him with one blond eyebrow raised; he twisted his mouth at her.

"What?" she said, pulling out her earphones again.

He shrugged and wriggled a bit.

"Yeah, all right, love, enough with the cow eyes. What's actually up?"

Nate sat back in his chair and looked at Mindy. It took him a moment or two to answer.

"I saw her again."

"Who?"

"That mad sculptor woman."

"The Bored Wife?"

"Yeah. She tracked me down at the Bureau this lunchtime."

Mindy looked surprised and a bit concerned.

"That's a bit weird, isn't it? Is she actually a nutter?"

Nate considered the question carefully. He shook his head.

"I don't...I don't *think* so. I think she's just very used to getting what she wants."

This didn't reassure Mindy particularly.

"And what is it she wants?" she wondered, with a clouded face. "You?"

"Well..yes," he admitted, hastening to add, "but just to sculpt me, I'm absolutely sure of that."

"Why?" Mindy was still suspicious.

"That's what I asked her. She trotted out some sort of bullshit about wanting to develop as an artist. She wants to see if she can do a model of me and Loveflower that's true to us but just as beautiful as all her other work."

"That's a bit, um, a bit.., well, it's all wrong, isn't it? Why shouldn't a model of you be beautiful?"

"Oh well, you know. She seemed pretty sincere really, certainly wasn't trying to be offensive."

Mindy passed from wifely suspicion to wifely irritation.

"It does make me cross. It's the same old dog-walking-on-hind-legs thing, every time. What did you say to her?"

Nate rubbed his face and then peered over his fingers at his wife.

"I told her I didn't like her and stropped off."

Mindy blinked and then laughed, finally.

"Good lord, love, that's a bit much, isn't it? You don't usually blow up at every well-meaning do-gooder who pisses you off."

Nate was rueful.

"I know, I know. It's just there was something..something.."

"What?"

He shrugged again and shook his head wonderingly.

"I don't know. She actually seemed very nice but there was just..just something about her that rang my alarm bells."

"Look," remarked his wife, patiently, "get the pasta on the table and tell me all about it from the beginning. I still don't see why you're so upset."

He nodded, "No, I'm not quite sure either. Except that maybe, I think, maybe I made the wrong call."

*

As was generally the case, Nate felt easier in his mind once he had spoken to Mindy. The next day, at work, he decided that he was just going to forget the whole thing. Back at home, though, he discovered that Mindy had been thinking along entirely different lines.

“I looked her up today. At work.” she said, casually, from the other side of the kitchen table.

“What?” asked Nate, his mind very much on his dinner.

“Your fancy woman, that sculptor.”

That got his attention. He looked up from his plate, frowning.

“Looked her up? What do you mean?”

“Looked her up. I looked her up. Which word do you not understand? I took that brochure with me and then googled her during my lunch break.”

“Oh yes? Why?”

“I don’t know really. I was just trying to see if I could find an email address or something. Yesterday, you seemed like you might be having second thoughts. I thought maybe that if you knew how to contact her, you could decide what you really wanted in a calm way rather than just over-reacting all the time.”

He grinned at her.

“Bit harsh..did you find anything?”

“Well yes, actually. I found her website..and I found..this.”

Mindy reached across to the other edge of the table. She picked up a sheet of paper, lying on top of all her Level 4 paraphernalia and handed it to Nate.

“What’s this?”

“I printed it off. It’s a review. She’s got an exhibition on in Camden Town at the moment, at the Jewish Museum. Someone wrote this about it. It’s pretty interesting, seems to have caused quite a stir. There’s a whole bunch of stuff about it if you google it.”

Nate sat back in his chair and read the piece of paper that Mindy had given him. For two or three minutes his face was closed.

“Funny, you’d never think that to look at her,” was all he said.

Then, he grew thoughtful.

“That’s it..I knew I’d seen her before. Do you remember? She was on South East Today a few weeks’ ago. They were asking her about, must

have been about this," (he waved the sheet of paper) "and she was basically saying how it's a load of codswallop. She was pretty convincing, don't you remember? The presenter was definitely on her side."

Mindy nodded. "Do you think it might explain..?"

Nate was frowning again, re-reading the review. "I think it explains a whole bunch of stuff."

"What do you think?" she asked with some obvious concern.

"What d'you mean, what do I think?" He was becoming abrupt.

"Well, how does it make you feel? I mean, on the one hand, it's a pretty nasty review. On the other hand, she wants to sculpt *you* - that doesn't fit with this," she indicated the piece of paper that Nate was still clutching. "Doesn't fit at all. So maybe the reviewer got it wrong."

"Maybe. Or maybe she's just proving a point." He was still abrupt.

"Could be. Or maybe," wondered Mindy, "she's actually trying to - what was it she said? - develop as an artist. Get beyond that review."

She stopped for a couple of seconds and then continued very slowly, "In the end, does it actually matter?"

"Matter?" exploded Nate, finally. "Of course it fucking matters. I've spent my life bashing my head against this sort of body fascism. Why would I deliberately get involved with one of those bigots?"

He stood suddenly, toppling his chair, and paced around the small room.

"No, I know. But think about it, love," Mindy continued earnestly. "If she's genuinely trying to open her mind, then who better than you to help her with that?"

Nate grunted, dismissively. But Mindy hadn't finished.

"Besides," she went on, "*if* she made a model of you, it *would* be beautiful. Bound to be. Look at that brochure, all her stuff is beautiful. She doesn't do ugly."

Nate picked up his fallen chair and sat down again.

"That's hardly the point," he said, calmer now.

"Isn't it?" she asked him. "I think it might be exactly the point. People won't see her attitude, however dreadful it is. They'll just see a beautiful model of a beautiful man who just happens to be thalidomide, brilliantly riding a beautiful horse."

He made a noncommittal face as he thought about it.

“You’re always banging on about the lack of positive public images,” Mindy pushed on. “I’m not sure you could get a better one.”

“You think I should do it?” He could hardly believe it.

“I don’t think anything,” she contradicted him. ‘Except that I think you should consider the issue properly. You already seem to want to, almost.’ She laughed briefly, “It’s just that she gets your back up each time you see her so you over-react before you’ve had time to make a sensible decision.”

He couldn’t really argue with that but he was not yet convinced.

“Yes, but there has to be a reason *why* she gets my back up. It’s a bad sign.”

Mindy smiled widely at him.

“I know but it might simply be because she’s rich and a bit spoilt. That’s usually enough for you.” (Nate smiled back at her.) “It doesn’t *have* to mean that she’s a eugenic bigot who wants to gas anyone with the wrong colour eyes. And it certainly doesn’t mean she’s not talented.”

“You think I should do it,” Nate stated again.

“That’s absolutely up to you, my love. I just think you should think about it properly.”

Nate was still extremely dubious. “I don’t know..I’m not sure what to make of any of this.”

The two of them had finished eating by now. They cleared the plates and decamped to the leatherette sofa.

“I tell you what,” Mindy suggested, “why don’t we take the tube up to Camden and go and see this blessed exhibition for ourselves. Might make things clearer for you.”

Nate perked up at this proposal. “That’s an idea. We could ask Keith and Karen too. It’s right up Karen’s street.”

“True enough,” agreed his wife. “What about one day next week, straight after work? We could go for a few beers in one of those terribly trendy pubs afterwards. Play at being hip for a few hours.”

Nate smiled at his wife. “That’s a great plan, I haven’t seen Keith for ages. OK, I’ll text him.”

*

It was Friday evening of the week following that Nate walked back up into Lewisham to meet Mindy at her gym. She was already waiting for him in the reception area. He

could see that she must have showered, after her last class of the day. She had on the same jeans and grey marl hoodie that she so often wore but she'd brushed out her hair and done something to her eyes.

They left the gym and wandered the rest of the way up to Lewisham's DLR station. Nat grasped his wife's upper arm and turned her to face him, briefly.

"You look lovely. Thanks."

Mindy stood on tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

"No worries, love. Come on, let's see what we're going to get here. We can always just leave, remember? You got your Oyster card?"

Nate draped his left arm over the back of Mindy's shoulders and they carried on. She leaned in to him with the familiarity of several years and the two of them proceeded together in perfect synchronisation. At Lewisham station, they found Keith and Karen already waiting for them. Nate's two oldest friends were curious about the evening's mission so Nate and Mindy used the journey to fill them in.

Once at Camden Town, they found the Jewish Museum with no difficulty. It was a tall, elegant townhouse with an unexpectedly thick, dead-bolted glass front door. Nate was further startled to find an impeccably-mannered security guard outside who searched all their bags. Once inside, they followed the signs up to the first floor and the Vigour exhibition.

The exhibition space took them all by surprise. The room was dark, its windows shuttered, and it was hard to make out the extent of the space. Three or four spotlights shining on the three large human figures provided the only illumination. The eight foot figures seemed to soar and stretch into the darkness. Curves of stainless steel glinted here and there, throwing shadows and reflections out to disappear into the gloom.

The group was silent for several minutes as they circled the exhibition, all of them awed by the scale and presence of the work. Three or four other people were also slowly taking in the sight. A cloistered hush pervaded the space.

As Nate moved, he collided briefly with another man. He recoiled quickly but the other didn't seem particularly fazed. He was a dapper gent in tweed, sporting round, wire-framed spectacles.

"No, that's OK. I always get a little dazed here myself and this is, hmm, the fifth time I've been, I think."

"You're a fan?" asked Nate curiously. The two of them conversed in low tones.

"I am now," replied the man. "Never heard of her before this exhibition but, goodness me, what a talent."

"You think?"

“Oh for sure, without doubt. I only came in the first place to see what all the fuss was about but I’ve been back at least once a week ever since.”

“Fuss? What..?”

“Oh, storm in a tea cup really, “ dismissed the über-fan. “Some stupid cow of a critic, basically saying Hughes just gets off on beautiful bodies. As if that’s some sort of crime. It was all over the Arts press. I mean, what specious nonsense. There’s more than just beauty here..” he raised his arm, following the lines of one of the figures, “..look at the power, the movement. Look at the life in them. It’s breath-taking.”

“It’s certainly that,” Nate agreed, amused by such blatant infatuation. But the other man hadn’t finished yet.

“And the skill, must have taken astonishing skill to bend all this steel to just the exact right degree. I understand she does it all with her bare hands too. What a woman!”

The two men wandered round together for a few more seconds and then the tweed-clad gentleman said, with clear regret, “Well, that’s me. I have to go. Can’t believe this closes tonight and I won’t be able to come and worship any more.” He patted his soft leather satchel with satisfaction, “At least I’ve got her catalogue. That’ll have to do. Enjoy yourself, my friend.”

Nate nodded a vague farewell and carried on around the figures until he met up with Mindy and the other two again. They conversed in low tones so as not to despoil the sepulchral atmosphere of the room.

“What do you think?” Mindy peered anxiously at her husband.

“It’s..astounding.”

“Mmm,” Mindy nodded her agreement slowly. “Beautiful.”

Karen agreed. “Yup. Definitely.”

“But you can see why someone might call it eugenic, though,” Mindy went on, carefully. “It’s practically..who was that bloke who went on about Superman?”

“Stan Lee?” asked Keith. “That was Spiderman.”

“No, you klutz. A race of Supermen. Some German bloke. I can’t remember.”

“Hitler, you mean?” Keith was teasing her now.

“Nooo, no, no. I know Hitler. Before that. But anyway. Does it not strike you like that? Nate?”

Nate was quiet. Indecision distorted his usually straightforward features.

“I don’t know. Could be. I mean, really could be. But if..” His voice trailed off.

“But if she makes you look anything like this, she can be whatever the hell she wants? That it?” Karen put it in a nutshell.

Nate moved his head in a gesture that may or may not have been positive.

“Yeah, maybe. Kind of.”

The few other people in the room were starting to throw disapproving glances their way. Nate nodded towards the door and the four of them went out into the stairwell.

“Come on,” he said. “There’s a café downstairs. Let’s go and have a think.”

“What was that chap saying to you?” asked Keith. “He looked like a throwback from the fifties.”

“You should know.” Mindy was teasing back. Keith pulled a face at her.

“He seemed to be some sort of super fan,” Nate related. “Said he turned up originally because he’d seen that awful review and wanted to see what all the fuss was about. He reckons it’s a load of rubbish.”

“The exhibition?” asked Keith.

“No, you klutz. The review.”

The four of them were still walking down stairs.

“What do you think?” Mindy looked up at her husband anxiously.

Nate sighed.

“The whole thing makes me feel very, very jittery. I’m not sure why.”

Karen had little time for these existential ditherings. “If you feel that badly about it, then just forget it,” she said, sagely.

“But, in a way, Mindy’s right.” Nate was groping, thinking aloud. “She might have an appalling attitude, she might not.” He paused. “In the end..”

“..in the end,” asked his wife, “the result will be the same? A beautiful and, I would guess, very well-publicised statue of a thalidomide man riding a horse. How often does that happen?”

Nate stopped and looked at his wife. The four of them had reached the foyer on the ground floor.

“You think I should do it, don’t you?”

Mindy took a breath in but before she could reply, the front door to the museum burst open and two people rushed in, chattering and laughing. One, a woman decked in colourful prints, had a bottle of wine in each fist. The other, a powerfully-built young man sporting the hipster uniform of the moment (enormo-beard and checked shirt) bore a cardboard box.

Nate flinched briefly but it was too late. She had seen him.

“Good Lord, it’s you. How wonderful. Really, how wonderful to see you. Did you come to see my show? That’s so nice. This must be..?”

“This is Mindy, my wife. These are my friends, Keith and Karen.”

Mindy looked at the new arrival guardedly but nodded amicably enough.

“Mindy, everyone, this is Rhiannon. I’ve been telling you about her.”

“And this is my eldest son, James - the Jimson, we call him. Look, you’re not leaving are you?”

“We were just about to..”

“No, no, no, don’t do that. Seriously, not yet. Come back upstairs for half an hour or so. I’ve got some fizz,” she brandished the wine bottles she held. “The show’s just about to close so I thought we’d have a small celebration - just us and whoever’s left up there. We’ve got enough for a glass each for a handful of people, I reckon. Come on. I was supposed to be here half an hour ago.”

The four looked at each other in mild bewilderment. Three of them looked questioningly at Nate; he shrugged. They all started off after Rhiannon and James.

“So,” began Mindy, skipping a little to catch up, “it’s been a successful show then?”

Rhiannon beamed at her.

“Oh, tremendously. Most people have loved it, it’s had an awful lot of exposure. Far more people have come to see it than I was expecting. Potentially, there’s a whisper of a big commission on the back of it, too,” She grinned wickedly, “if I can just talk your husband into sitting for me.”

In the dark exhibition room, James put the cardboard box down on the floor and Rhiannon handed him the the bottles she carried. Then she switched on the lights. There was a small murmur of surprise. Now, Nate could see that there were five other people in the room, including one drooping woman in a hideous dress.

“Rhiannon.’ The drooping woman came over to join them.

“Debs, so sorry,” Rhiannon kissed her on both cheeks. “I lost my purse right as we were leaving.” Debs didn’t appear particularly astonished by this information. “Let me introduce Nate Turner and his wife..” she looked enquiringly at Mindy.

“Mindy,” said Nate, with a little tension in his jaw. Rhiannon smiled enchantingly at Mindy.

“Yes, of course. Sorry, I’ve a shocking memory for names. Debs, can I wrap up now?”

Debs nodded her assent and Rhiannon moved to the centre of the room, to stand within the arms, it seemed, of her spell-binding work. The four other visitors were already watching her and they now drew in a little closer.

“Ladies and gentleman, “ she began with beautiful clarity. “I just want to thank everyone here for supporting my exhibition. It took a lot of my blood, sweat and tears to make these figures. And then almost as much again to shift them into this room.” She paused, then added, with pinpoint timing, “They’re bloody heavy.”

There was an appreciative ripple of laughter. Rhiannon continued:

“This is the last day of the show, the last minutes, in fact. You could call it the death throes, I suppose. I’m just overwhelmed by the way it’s been received.” She did indeed seem not too far from happy tears. “I’d love all those of you still here now to join me in a glass, just to mark what, for me - and, I hope, for you - has been a memorable event.”

Right on cue, James popped the cork on one of the bottles (Sainsbury’s Cava, Nate could see the label) and started pouring the wine into a mismatched selection of glasses that, one by one, he pulled from the cardboard box. The small audience gathered round and happily accepted the libation.

There was a discreet level of chatter as people expressed their delight, asked a few asinine questions. Nate had tight hold of Mindy’s upper arm as he drank his warm wine. People were throwing the usual subversive glances his way and a couple of them nodded at the striking couple but no-one was intrusive enough actually to talk to them.

Once the wine had been doled out, Rhiannon again raised her hands for silence and spoke, “Just one last thing, ladies and gentlemen, a toast. Without the invaluable assistance of the museum curator - there she is, that’s Deborah - the exhibition would not have even taken place, let alone been such a success.” She raised her glass to the curator, “Deborah, from the bottom of my heart.”

The audience muttered a little indistinctly and Debs, smiling with self-conscious delight, turned an unbecoming dark pink. People were finishing their fizz and drifting off. Soon, it was just the four of them left plus Rhiannon, James and Deborah. James started to collect up the empty glasses.

Karen was frowning slightly. Nate knew that look. Her managerial mind had been assessing the situation and had found a glitch. He was right. Two minutes later, she directed a question at Rhiannon.

“How’d you get in?” she asked. “With the wine and the glasses, I mean. The security here seems pretty keen.”

Rhiannon smiled back at the other woman and Nate felt again her overwhelming charisma.

“Oh, it wasn’t difficult,” she replied. “They know me pretty well by now. I hardly had to persuade them at all.”

She drained her glass and then came out with a question of her own - but not to Karen.

“So, what do you think?” The question was directed at Mindy but Rhiannon was obviously keeping a close eye on Nate’s reaction. “Do you like them?”

Mindy seemed a little lost for words.

“They’re...stunning,” she said, eventually. “Really, stunning.”

“I’m so glad you think so. I must say, these are among my own personal favourites but I do all sorts of things. It doesn’t have to be great big swathes of stainless steel. I do a mean bronze too.”

“I know, I’ve seen your brochure.” (Rhiannon turned delighted eyes upon Nate.) “There was one of an old man in a long robe. A priest or something. I mean..just..amazing.”

Rhiannon looked at Mindy seriously for a second or two. “Thank you,” she said simply. “I really appreciate that.” She turned to Debs, “Debs, I’ve been trying to convince this gentleman to let me model him. He rides the prettiest horse, I think a bronze of the two of them would be such a *fascinating* challenge. It’s my obvious next step from here, if you ask me.”

“I’d certainly love to see that, Rhiannon,” the curator replied. She looked at Nate properly for the first time. “Are you not keen, Mr Turner?”

“I, ah, um, I..”

“Nate claims he doesn’t like me,” put in Rhiannon mischievously. Nate frowned at her.

“That’s not fair.”

“No?” asked Rhiannon with her eyebrows raised. “It’s exactly what you said in the pub.”

“I know. But..”

Rhiannon dropped her bantering tone.

“Look, I know I didn’t necessarily go about this very well. I mean, if I’d planned it, I would have done it quite differently. But I couldn’t have known I was going to see you at the riding school that day. And..and I know that tracking you down at your work wasn’t perhaps the *sanest* thing I’ve ever done but I had no other way of getting hold of you, did I? I just really, really, *really* want to do this. I think it could be the best thing I’ve ever done.”

“What’s stopping you, Mr Turner?” asked Debs, with curiosity. “Do you not like Rhiannon’s work?”

“No, no. It’s not that. I mean, it’s astonishing stuff. It’s just..just that..” he shrugged. Debs’ eyes flew to his arms and then flew straight off again. “I don’t know,” he finished lamely.

“I tell you what,” said Rhiannon, in a conciliatory tone, “I’ll give you complete power of veto. Why don’t we just get started? If you don’t like the process or don’t like what I do then you can change it or end it whenever you want. And I won’t use the material unless you say it’s OK. How about that?”

Nate turned to Mindy. Silently, he asked the question. Silently, she gave him an answer: “Why not?”

He turned back to Rhiannon.

“OK, let’s do it..”

Rhiannon, Debs and even James burst into spontaneous applause. Keith and Karen were smiling broadly. Nate continued speaking over the clamour,

“..but only like you said. I can stop the whole thing, if I want to.”

“Of course, of course.”

Rhiannon was delighted. Even Mindy was smiling now. “You won’t regret it, I promise. It’ll be sensational. Come on, James. What’s left in that second bottle? Get it out, boy, get it out.”

Chapter Six

You meet people, when you're a doctor, and you see things.

You meet a smiling woman in her forties. She is sitting in the waiting room of your clinic, expertly knitting something complicated while she waits. When she comes through to your consulting room, you see that her distorted, floppy fingers are gradually sliding off her red rheumatoid hands at an angle of forty five degrees.

You meet a beautiful twenty two year old woman on the acute surgical ward, one Saturday night. She has long, honey-coloured hair and a perfect figure. She also has a fever and a tummy ache that no-one can quite explain. In the early hours of Sunday morning, you see the operating surgeon slice open her large intestine and scoop out the gloves. Cheap, disposable, petrol station gloves. Dozens of them, fistfuls of them. The surgeon goes on and on pulling out these deliberately-ingested gloves like a conjuror pulling streamers from his mouth.

You meet an elderly gentleman with a hole in his chest. This permanent hole, the diameter of a tennis ball, has been deliberately cored through his skin and through his ribs to vent the ever-bubbling geyser of stench in his thorax. You see him slap a stoma bag over the hole and go home to care for his demented wife.

You meet a muscle-bound young sportsman in Casualty. He has a ventricular tachycardia of nearly one hundred and seventy beats per minute. He admits to nothing but everyone knows why. The consultant cardiologist tries everything she knows - and a good few things that she doesn't, really - to slow his heart down but none of it works. Six hours later, you go back through Casualty and you see someone else in his space. The nurse tells you he's dead.

So you learn. You learn that truth is...bespoke. And you learn that seduction is just exactly that.

*

"Hitler Youth, a couple of people have said. Can you believe it?"

"Seriously?"

"I know. Honestly, you do your best, don't you? There've been a few complaints."

I tilted my head and looked again at the shield high up on the old wall. It wasn't my favourite of all Rhiannon's work, I found it difficult to get excited about a commemorative shield for a nobby school that I never got to go to. Nonetheless, as far as I could see, she had pulled it off beautifully, as she always did.

She laughed briefly. "I should have made him left-handed, then no-one would have batted an eyelid."

The shield is divided into four quadrants. I don't remember now what they all show. A local landmark, maybe the cathedral, the school bell tower, that sort of thing. Right at

the heart of the work, projecting out in high relief, is an eager beaver of a schoolboy, complete with cap. He is leaning forward, keen to answer a question. His right hand is raised.

I laughed in turn.

“Oops!” I said. “That would never have occurred to me if you hadn't told me. People look for outrage, if you ask me.”

She smiled ruefully. “You’re not wrong. Hard not to see it, though, isn't it? Not once someone’s said it.”

“Well, there’s not a lot you can do about it now,” I said with the pragmatism of the uninvolved. “Not unless you’re going to take it down and start all over again.”

“Can’t do that, they’ve already had the unveiling ceremony. Besides, I can’t afford it. They wouldn’t pay me twice, I don’t suppose. I made a loss on it as it is.”

It was a Saturday morning in the autumn of 1997. I was down in Kent for the weekend, catching up with people that I hadn’t seen while I’d been away. I’d been in South Africa for six months of that year (Rob was still there) on an Orthopaedic Surgery Fellowship. I flew back on the very same day that Princess Diana got into a Mercedes with Dodi Fayed.

Rhiannon was heavily pregnant at this point, she would give birth to her second son, Arthur, only seven weeks later. For the moment, we were ambling gently around her old school while her first son, my godson, was running around one of its rugby pitches. She’d wanted to show me the shield.

“Cup of coffee, darling?” I suggested. It was a beautiful, bright, bitterly cold day.

“Why not? We’ll warm up for half an hour or so and then get back in time to watch the second half.”

I watched her as she led the way to the school refectory (set up as an informal café for the - to me - surprising number of students and parents who frequented the school on a Saturday morning). She was leaning back a little, keeping her centre of gravity nicely over her feet. On the whole, she looked to be in extremely rude health.

I bought myself some milky instant coffee and, for Rhiannon, a cup of hot chocolate. We sat down at one of the tables.

“Wish I’d had the same as you.” I grimaced as I sipped my drink. “It’s ‘orrible coffee. Instant chocolate is always quite nice, I think.”

“Yes, I’ve been missing coffee - but not like that,” she agreed.

“Caffeine make you queasy?” I asked.

“Gosh no, I’m eating like a horse. But the antenatal clinic says lay off caffeine. So I’m laying off.”

“I must say, you look well enough. All going according to plan?”

She smiled contentedly as she warmed her poor hands around her mug.

“Ooh, tickety boo, thanks. So far so good. I’d forgotten how much I love being pregnant.”

“Really?” I was dubious about this. The whole business looked dreadful to me.

“Oh yes, same as last time.” She looked up at me, joy lighting her blue eyes. “It’s such an overwhelming feeling. I feel so *strong*.”

This threw me a bit.

“Strong?”

“Mm, like I could lift up a house. It’s wonderful.”

“And can you?”

“What?”

“Lift up a house.”

She laughed at that.

“I haven’t tried.”

“Best not, eh? Not now. I only ever delivered one baby and that was, crikey, it must be eight or nine years ago now.”

We laughed together then and I felt, as I always did, how lovely it was to see her. There was no-one else that made me feel like she did. No-one else with whom I felt so..at home, I suppose. It was always so easy.

Robin, I feel just as much at home with Robin but he requires more effort. Oh, believe me, I don’t doubt that Rhiannon requires effort too. Just not from me. She’s not my problem, in that sense. At the end of the afternoon, I can give her back.

She was changing the subject.

“Did you hear about Mozzy Morris?”

“Miss Morris? No, what about her?”

Miss Morris had been our indefatigable French teacher at the Convent of the Poor Clares. I don’t think I’d cast her so much as a thought for at least the last ten years.

“She died. Couple of years ago. I was talking to Marion recently. She told me.”

“Really? Good Lord.” I blew out my cheeks. “She wasn’t that old, was she?”

“Fifty-something maybe.”

“That’s no age. What’d she die of?”

“Dunno. Marion didn’t say. Broken heart maybe.”

I smiled slightly at her joke. Our beloved school had closed four years previously, just one year shy of its centenary. It’s hard to imagine what someone like Miss Morris would have done with herself afterwards.

“Shame about the Convent in a way.” Rhiannon was waxing equivocal.

“Shame it shut or shame what happened to it?”

“Mm, both I suppose.”

Again, I knew where she was coming from. I mourned the school that I had known but, in all honesty, I don’t think it was the same school that had stuttered on for another ten years without us. Shortly after our departure, Madam Dunstan had finally retired and her place was taken by a lay headmistress. I never knew this woman, I never even knew her name, but it all started to get a bit strange at that point. There were some rather unsavoury rumours.

Rhiannon was still talking.

“D’you remember the last time we were there?”

I smiled. “The night Orla fell down the steps.”

She laughed at the memory. “That’s it. I’ve never been back since. You?”

I shook my head. “Nope. And now it’s gone, bulldozed, the whole lot. Retirement flats now, I think.”

*

The night Orla fell down the steps - I remember it well. It was the end of the Autumn term in 1984. Rhiannon and I had gone back to see the school play, an adaptation of "A Christmas Carol". Our friend, Orla, had the most important rôle. She had been in the class below us and, in both our opinions, was one of only a handful of interesting people still left at the school. She was also, much like Rhiannon, a talented actress.

On a miserable, sleeting evening, the Thursday before Christmas, we approached our old assembly hall by its rear entrance. A man - somebody’s father, presumably - held the door open for us; I smiled and thanked him as I went up the couple of steps,

slick with water. Rhiannon followed behind me and when we were both seated, I could see that she was a little piqued.

“Did you hear him?” she asked me, in tones of incredulity.

“Who?”

“Him,” she jerked her head backwards. “The man holding the door.”

“No. What?”

“He said ‘Careful how you go, Trouble.’ Can you believe it?”

I considered this carefully. It didn’t seem particularly difficult to believe, to be honest.

“Sorry, what are you talking about?”

“Trouble. He called me Trouble. *Me.*”

I blinked a few times and tried thinking about it again. But I still had no clue what part of that routine pleasantry she was objecting to.

“Just being friendly, I guess,” was all I managed to come up with. It didn’t help.

“How *could* he, though?”

I shook my head vaguely and settled down to enjoy the show.

As a school play, it was fine, despite the fact that the stage seemed to have shrunk. It now looked pitifully small to me. Competent and ingenious use of a limited budget had provided effective scenery. Competent if intermittently lumpen performances by most of the cast produced a likeable show.

Orla, however, proved a *tour de force*. She dragged the rest of the cast single-handedly through that play and practically had the audience on its feet by the end. Her performance had but one slip. In the final scene, as Scrooge is hurrying and fretting that he's missed Christmas Day entirely, she tripped over her own feet down some steps. There was a heavy stumble and a rapid recovery. The celebratory nature of both the scene itself and her own performance meant that she could grin widely at the audience and, largely, get away with it.

After the play had finished, Orla came to find us at the back of the school hall where we were drinking weak orange squash. She was flushed and pleased. I was delighted that she'd done so well.

"Well done, Orla. Fantastic performance. You were the best thing in that play."

"Ah thanks," she grimaced with mixed modesty. "Shame about that trip though."

"Doesn't matter," I countered, warmly. "Doesn't matter at all."

I meant it too. Small flaw it might have been but it hardly detracted from the strength of the performance. Trip or no trip, her abilities as an actress had been abundantly clear.

"Don't be stupid, Sara," snapped Rhiannon suddenly. "Of course it matters."

Orla looked a little crestfallen but it would have taken more than Rhiannon to dull her shine at that instant. She wandered away and I was left, for the second time that night, puzzling at my friend.

*

Those were the years that Rhiannon and I didn't see so much of each other. The distance between us is not vast but it is disproportionately troublesome. To further hamper us, she's useless at email while I refuse ever to pick up a 'phone. No-one writes letters any more.

Plus, we were both busy, of course, carefully nurturing careers and families. I remember the day she told me about John. I'd shacked up with Robin by then. We had pushed even further into the interior, retreated into deepest, darkest Derbyshire. We're there still. One Saturday morning, she telephoned me. That was before I'd developed my habit of simply ignoring the landline.

"You'll never guess who I'm going out with," she said, her excitement evident, even along the wire.

"er.." I hazarded, "George Peppard?"

"Noooo, you idiot. Nice idea, though. Try again."

"Rhi, really, I've no idea. Who?"

"John."

For a wonderful instant, my heart soared.

"*John?! That's fantastic!*"

"Isn't it just? I'm ridiculously happy."

I was delighted that my dearest friend had reconciled with her old love, the father of her treasured child.

"That's wonderful. Really, that's wonderful. How'd you bump into him again? I thought he'd gone to the States?"

"The States? Good Lord, no. Whatever gave you that idea? He's in East Anglia. We're moving over soon. Me and the Jimson."

I found it a little difficult to make sense of that.

“What on earth’s he doing in East Anglia?” I laughed, “Is there much work for stock traders there? Still, I suppose it’s very easy to work from anywhere these days.”

“Sara, what on earth are you talking about? John’s not a stock..ohhh.”

She was laughing and laughing, eventually got herself under control.

“Not John *Kearney*, you chump. Not in a million years. No. *Hughes*, John *Hughes*. I bumped into him again at a party in Rochester a few months’ ago. He’s still gorgeous.”

John Hughes. Well fancy that, John Hughes. This time, there were no setbacks; they rapidly got their planetary alignment all sorted out. Within two years, they were married.

Despite the distance, Rhiannon and I maintained the thin red line between us - Christmas cards, birthday presents for the kids, the usual. Every so often, Rob and I would be back in Kent for a weekend or a few days so I managed to see her from time to time.

All the while, I followed her career with some interest - and no little pride.

After her graduation (1st class honours. I think she was the top student in her year), she did nothing terribly conspicuous for a while. These things take time. Besides, as I said, she was busy having a life.

It was the turn of the century that eventually supplied the springboard for her current success. She was commissioned to create a sculpture for the Millennium that would express the rich maritime heritage of the Medway area. This work now stands on the shore of a small island in the river near Chatham.

I’m no artist but to me, this piece - *Seafarers* - is seminal. It contains, within its beautiful seed coat, all the elements that Rhiannon has gone on to sound and sound again through the last decade.

Seafarers consists of a yacht whose sails are being hauled around by two sailors. It’s a big piece - bigger than life-sized - and feels somehow monumental. Hull and sails are stone and stainless steel. The two sailors, both cast in bronze, are united in place and purpose but separated in time. The woman is young, contemporary. Barely clad in a wet suit, her sleek, muscular form heaves against the rope she holds in both hands. The man is clearly from times past - a traditional tar in rough sailor garb, all beautifully realised.

There were earlier pointers, of course. Her graduation show was enormous and made of feathers. It had to be dismantled in the end; no-one had anywhere to put it. *The Storm*, an early work in steel, is not big but it is muscular and marine. But in *Seafarers*, it’s all there. For the first time, it’s all there.

She has subsequently developed two separate, albeit closely-related, strands of work.

Her portraits (can sculptures be portraits? You know what I mean) in bronze are super-sized masterpieces of accuracy and empathy - Huw Thomas on Anglesey, Barbara Castle who never got beyond the maquette, The Founding Father at Villa Park.

Her “fictional” work, on the other hand, is wrought from stainless steel. These figures are just as big but not so traditionally represented. They depict athletes, sailors, dancers, sportsmen. They are less immediately empathic, there is nothing to distract you from their concentrated physicality.

Of necessity, her work is expensive and time consuming. She cannot just do what she wants and trust that someone will buy the result; she needs a commission. She does do some smaller modelling from time to time (dogs mainly, the occasional head or bust) but her heart isn't really in it.

I don't know which strand she prefers. She doesn't necessarily have as much choice as she might like. People do love a portrait. My instinct is that her personal preference has been moving towards the stainless steel athletes for the last few years. But still, she does a wicked bronze.

*

What was I doing for all these years? Well, much the same as Rhiannon really.

Robin and I married in 1995, the year after Rhiannon and John. Twelve years after that, we had a child of our own. Just the one (girl-flavoured), thank you very much, I was right about pregnancy. During Ellie's infancy, I avidly, frequently tried smelling her head but never could detect very much. Eventually, I decided that my baby girl was still so very much a part of me that I couldn't make out her separate scent.

The career has taken up an awful lot of time, particularly if you go about it the way I did. I don't recommend it.

I don't recommend spending ten years training in one discipline only to realise that you're no bloody good at it and then starting all over again in another.

I don't recommend that you scout about so desperately, trying to find some aspect of your work that you're actually interested in, that you start two different masters degrees and abandon them both.

I don't recommend finally finishing your training and then realising that you're not remotely where you want to be and you can't, quite, understand why you ever thought you did.

No, I don't recommend any of that, to be honest.

During one of my very last clinical training attachments, I watched a new consultant answer the telephone.

“Hello, theatre recovery,” she said when she picked up the receiver. “No, not me. I’m one of the consultant paediatric anaesthetists. Hang on, I’ll get Sister for you.”

It was so clear. The delight and pride in her voice were unmistakable and thoroughly disarming. There was simply nothing better in the world that she could call herself than a consultant paediatric anaesthetist. It was all she could ever want.

I have no idea how that feels. I can’t even imagine it.

Twenty two years. It’s twenty two years since I got my medical degree. I got it quite well too, only just missed a distinction. That puts me above the ninetieth centile of my year, or thereabouts. I’m not a bad doctor. In fact, I’m a lot better than some.

It makes no difference. Every single time you ask me what I do and every single time that I answer you, it’s there. Every single time. That tone in my voice which will tell you, should you listen properly, that I’m faking it. That I’m not a doctor, I can’t be a doctor, I don’t even want to be a doctor.

I don’t regret it, not really. Some of it’s been interesting, some of it’s been fun. If I hadn’t gone to medical school, I wouldn’t have met my husband or had my daughter so I can’t possibly regret it. I just wish it hadn’t taken quite so *long*. I’m not young anymore.

But here I am and here, for the moment, is where I have to stay.

Chapter Seven

This is where it gets difficult.

It's been, at worst, bitter-sweet so far. I've almost enjoyed this rambling preamble through thirty years of my history, trying to spot the glitches and the glints that perhaps should have alerted me earlier. The retrospectoscope is a marvellous instrument.

From here on in, however, there can be no equivocation. In one unspoken, unshared moment on a train, the soft, dense blindfold was gently lifted from my eyes, exposing me, whether I wanted it or no, to the searing light.

In the bitter winter of 2012, Robin and I took our daughter to Kent for Christmas to exhibit her to the parentals. While we were there, we had dinner with Rhiannon and John. It was always a pleasure to spend time with them on their Dutch barge, Scheherazade. Don't go thinking floral-daubed narrowboat, whatever you do. Scheherazade couches a cavernous, industrial, rectangular space. It's a floating warehouse apartment.

Rhiannon has ended up settling near to her childhood home. The barge is tethered at Halstead's Wharf, a small mooring on the Medway. A few years' ago, she and John scraped together enough to buy the surrounding land as well. It's a well-considered spot - remote enough and bleak enough and wild enough and yet, simultaneously, close to prettiness and prosperity and with reasonable access to the grandparents and the school (the two boys have followed their parents through the same venerable establishment). There are two dogs, a variable number of cats, several chickens and two horses.

For years, I couldn't get this at all. Why would anyone who had managed to slip the trawling net of family deliberately turn tail and swim right back into it? Three decades of living outside the Silvered Sphere, however, has taught me that the peculiarity is mine, rather than hers.

On this particular evening, the prospect of dinner shimmered as an oasis of unfettered adulthood for Robin and me. We left Ellie, safely asleep, with her grandparents and had a taxi booked for the return journey. For a few rare and precious hours, we could be entirely off-duty.

Rhiannon and John were throwing together the dinner in their new kitchen when we arrived. The generous, retro-styled area must have been an absolute joy to use after years of close contact in the tiny galley at the other end of the boat.

“How lovely,” I enthused. “Is it reclaimed?”

“No,” replied Rhiannon, flushing slightly. “Just pre-distressed.”

“Fits right in though, doesn't it? Good choice.”

Rob and I installed ourselves at the solid dining table with a plate of Philadelphia-and-smoked-salmon-topped Ritz crackers and large glasses of a delicious, deceptive French aperitif. I bedded in, with happy anticipation.

There were the four of us at dinner plus their younger boy, Arthur, a frankly beautiful Adonis, just turned fifteen. He already appeared to be about six foot tall. I had hoped to see my godson, too, but he was off doing whatever it is personable twenty six year old lads do between Christmas and New Year, these days.

We leant on our elbows around chicken casserole and capacious servings of red wine (not for Arthur, obviously, although he did have one small glass of beer) whilst the conversation ran to business. The economic downturn was still much in evidence that winter and for the self-employed John, it had been a precarious period.

On the one hand, he said, there had not been as much of a drop in trade as you might have expected. His was a luxury service, in a way, and his customers were mainly the very wealthy. The very wealthy had remained very wealthy throughout this whole turbulent time. John doubted whether they had even noticed the worldwide trouble they'd caused.

On the other hand, he continued, it takes only one. One client, who owed him a large amount of money, had run into trouble and defaulted on the payment. John's turnover was healthy but his margins were critically tight. The loss of this payment had shaken the company hard and they were going to have to let a couple of people go. Luckily, they had one or two herbivores on the books who would not be particularly missed.

He was optimistic that they'd seen the worst off. John is always optimistic.

For Rhiannon, the economic climate had resulted in a harsh professional drought. Her beautiful sculptures, so very much larger than life, were occasionally commissioned by the wealthy but more often by the communal or municipal. Such commissions had gone the way of Northern Rock's share price in the last few years.

She was attempting to be upbeat but was clearly somewhat despondent as she cleared away the debris of the main course.

"Rhi, that was delicious," remarked Robin, as he handed over his plate. "I didn't know you could cook?"

Rhiannon smirked at him with slight affront.

"Oh, I *can* cook. Pretty well actually. It's just that I tend not to bother, it's such a waste of my creativity."

The short, sharp silence that followed this remark was broken by John.

"Yeah, that's why we're eating so well, at the moment," he remarked, with grim humour. "No-one's buying creative right now."

Rhiannon did have one piece of good news, however - an up-coming show in London. The Jewish Museum in Camden Town was trying to promote itself as an intimate exhibition space for fine artists and had somehow become aware of her stuff.

They weren't in a position to commission anything new, but had suggested that she might like to show some of her existing work. There was no payment attached, but a hefty chunk of good publicity should naturally follow a successful exhibition.

"So, are you going to do it? What will you put in?" I asked her.

"Yes, absolutely," she replied. "They're already there. ManMaid and Colli - they look great in that space. I spent a few weeks bigging up the idea to the owners - they're all such terrible starfuckers, they didn't need much persuading. I'm going back tomorrow, actually, got a few things to check."

She got up to sort the pudding out. I was pleased for her.

"I love those two, I bet they look stunning together. I must make sure I get to see it. How long's it on for?"

"Nearly three months," she replied, as she manhandled a large Death by Chocolate out of the fridge. "Opens on January 20th - my birthday, hooray! - and finishes right at the start of April. Listen," she went on, "what are you doing tomorrow? Why don't you come up with me? Rob can take care of his child for a day."

She grinned at my husband. No-one could have resisted her, certainly not Robin.

*

The next morning found me returning, distinctly duntish, to the barge, in good time for the two of us to catch the ten o'clock train from Chatham to London. I paused on Scheherazade's gangway before I pulled open the door to the wheelhouse. The ever-present wind caught at threads of my hangover, pulling some adrift. It helped a bit. As I stood there, I spotted another, smaller barge moored behind Scheherazade. I hadn't noticed it last night, in the darkness. Was that usually there?

Down in the barge, Rhiannon was up-and-about and looking better than I felt. She was dressed in professional mode - rich fabrics and a conspicuous hat.

She took one look at me and laughed.

"Come on, woman, man up."

I grinned back, sort of. "I'll survive. Do we need to get going?"

After the last minute losing of things and finding of things, we went back outside and walked towards her car. I could hear the chickens dickering a little and one of the two horses whinnied. As we passed, I nodded at the smaller barge.

"Whose is that? You letting out a mooring? I guess every little helps, right now."

"No, that's mine - I bought it a few months' ago with the money I got for ManMaid. I've been renovating it. I really need a proper studio of my own; I was getting very fed up with Pete's freezing cold shed."

She held out her hands. Rhiannon always suffered from sluggish circulation in her extremities, which her particular *modus operandi* did nothing to ameliorate.

“Oh..right. Yes, your hands do suffer. That'll be great, I'm sure..um, I thought..you got some work on the horizon?”

“Not at the moment. That's been an ill wind, in a funny sort of way. Given me time to wrestle the place into shape.”

We caught the train without mishap and I settled back into the seat, pleased to watch flashbacks from my adolescence parade past the window. My hangover began to retreat, soothed by the rhythmic ministrations of the train and a double whack of ibuprofen. I've always loved the train journey from Kent to London, at least partly because of the view - the River Medway with the old submarine at Strood (Rob tells me it's Russian. I haven't bothered to check, he'll be right), Rochester's square castle and pointy cathedral, Battersea power station like an upturned table.

In the standing space between the doors, a city slicker rattled into his mobile. I smiled when I caught his rampant Estuary twang. These days, I'm so attuned to the softly flat vowels of Derbyshire that my native tongue sounds almost parodic to me now.

As the train slowed into Rochester station, a young man pulled up to the train door in his wheelchair. It was one of the aerodynamic sort with in-sloping wheels and a blue tubular frame. He was wearing sports kit - a football-type shirt and tracksuit top. I think he was wearing shorts but it was a little difficult to be sure because he had no legs at all. Really, none whatsoever.

My professional mind started wondering idly. Bilateral, ultra-high AKAs. Trauma, most likely, in a man of that age. Maybe he'd been in Afghanistan. He didn't look like a vasculopath, that was for sure. Lack of lower limbs aside, he was tanned, good-looking and held himself well. I kept a minimal eye on him, in case he needed a hand getting off the train. Tricky, isn't it? How best to be helpful without being patronising? I often find that the most straightforward way also seems to be the least offensive - just ask.

But this young man needed nothing from me. Once the train had stopped, he leapt (there is no other word for it) out of his chair and onto the floor. When the doors opened, he threw his lightweight wheelchair (titanium?) out onto the platform, in such a way that it turned in mid-flight and landed facing him. He leapt again, three or four feet, straight from the train into the wheelchair, whizzed the chair around and went on his way. The crowd on the platform murmured a little and then surged onto the train, business as usual.

The city slicker, gaping at the young man, entirely lost the thread of the conversation and had to apologise into his 'phone. He and I caught each other's eye and smiled with pleasure, mutually acknowledging the casual display of supreme athleticism we had just seen.

I turned to Rhiannon, “Wow! That was amazing.”

She seemed a little abstracted; maybe she was more hungover than she had been letting on, maybe she was pre-occupied with her coming exhibition. “Yes, amazing,” she murmured and turned back to the view from the window. I looked at her hard for a moment or two and then lost myself in thought for the remainder of the journey to Victoria. It didn’t take long, the train was fast from Bromley South.

*

Camden Town, in all its needy, self-conscious cacophony, is no place for a middle-aged introvert with a severe hangover. I was grateful that the Jewish Museum lies in the opposite direction from the main drag.

It's located in an elegant townhouse, halfway down one of the wide, quietly beautiful streets that London still does so well. It's a surprising place in many ways. I wasn't expecting such rigorous security, for a start, but I suppose it makes sense.

The decent, traditional frontage gives onto an unexpectedly modern interior, all blond wood and shiny surfaces. The place must have been gutted at some point. Now, it's completely open with a steel and wooden staircase spiralling up to the top. The whole effect is light, bright. It's very nice.

ManMaid and Colli were filling a somewhat unprepossessing box of a side room on the first floor. I know both pieces well, they are among my favourite of Rhiannon’s figures. As with all her work, they are flawlessly beautiful.

She slowly circled the installation for twenty minutes or so, muttering and making mental note of things that weren’t quite to her specification. This was all rather beyond me. As far as I could see, what can you do with two such monumental works except put them in place and invite people to love them? There are many reasons why I’m not an artist.

My headache was returning in spades and I was unable to respond usefully to her comments and questions. Eventually, she gave up on me and wandered off to find someone who could help her. I sat down on the floor and contemplated the figures, feeling more and more unwell. I leaned my head back against the wall and closed my eyes.

I opened them again when I heard footsteps. A young man had entered the room. He looked around briefly and saw that I was the only person present. He strode over and held out his hand.

“Hi, I’m Adrian,” as if this should mean something to me. “Where’s Rhiannon?”

I was at a distinct disadvantage on the floor but not remotely inclined to get up. I reached up and shook his hand.

“Um, Sara. I don’t know. She went to find someone.” I shook my head, a little. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

He drew his eyebrows in a little and frowned down at me.

“Adrian. Adrian Malakar. *Sculpting Today!* You are expecting me?”

Again, I very carefully shook my head.

“Not me. I’m not expecting anyone. I didn’t even know I was going to be here today until yesterday. If you see what I mean.”

His eyes hazed over a little and I realised I was sounding somewhat incoherent. It was time to bring myself together. With an effort, I stood up.

“I’m sorry, you’ll have to bear with me. I’ve got a raging hangover. I’m Sara, Rhiannon’s friend. I’m just here to take a look.”

The Adrian-person looked me over and must have seen the accuracy of my statement. He smiled sympathetically.

“Ah, OK. I’m Adrian Malakar,” he repeated, as if to an idiot child. “I’m the editor of *Sculpting Today!* Rhiannon was kind enough to suggest that I preview the exhibition. I’m supposed to be meeting her.”

He was young, thirty-ish, tastefully dressed with all i’s dotted.

At this moment, my friend walked back in, grasping the arm of a blond woman in an odd dress and red tights who turned out to be Deborah, the assistant curator of the museum. Rhiannon was delighted to find Adrian and there was a round of mwah-mwahs while everyone was introduced. At this point, the three of them started to talk technical to a degree that made my swimming head go under.

I laid a hand on Rhiannon’s upper arm.

“I’m going to find coffee. Can I get anyone anything?”

Rhiannon merely frowned at me and continued talking. I went out of the box-like room and into the main body of the museum. After wandering up and down a bit, I eventually found the café back on the ground floor.

I bought myself a caffeine hit and sat down at an empty table. It was good coffee but it didn’t in any way make me feel better. I cradled my poor head in my hands and tried to work out exactly why I was feeling so awful. It wasn’t just the headache. I also had a gnawing, butterfly-feeling, as if I was about to take a difficult and extremely important exam. After a while, I gave up and used the dregs of the coffee to wash down another couple of ibuprofen. I left the café, wandered vaguely around some of the permanent exhibits and eventually returned to the first floor side room.

The room was dark now. The blinds had been closed and spotlights fell upon ManMaid and Colli. Curves of stainless steel glowed in the gloom and the figures threw distorted, mythic shadows across the floor. In that moment, I knew. I knew exactly what was wrong and the butterfly-feeling evaporated instantly. I felt, instead, as if I had landed in a grave.

The lights flicked on. Rhiannon and Adrian and Debs were standing together on the other side of the room. Rhiannon looked pleased, as well she might. Her creations

had appeared as warriors in the clever lighting. As I reached the group, Debs made her excuses and went back to work. Adrian appeared to be cajoling Rhiannon about some notion he'd dreamt up.

"What do you think, Rhiannon? It's an interesting idea, yes?"

Rhiannon turned to me and explained. "Adrian's trying to find an outsider to write a review of the exhibition." She was dubious. "I don't really understand why."

Adrian smiled. He was as smooth and highly polished as the stone whose name he so nearly bears.

"You know how it is, Rhiannon. Everyone in the sculpting world knows everyone else and everyone has their own agenda."

True enough, said the look on Rhiannon's face. Adrian continued:

"If you get one of us to do it, you will either get someone who will write, hmm - how can I put it?, an *onanistically* good review because they want you on side for some reason. Or you'll get someone who will shit all over the show, because you won a commission three years ago that they wanted someone else to have."

"Surely there's someone though, Adrian? You must know *someone*?"

"I don't, you know. Not anyone genuinely objective. Well," he admitted, "not anyone who isn't already working for the competition. It's tough, trying to get in on the ground floor. I want *Sculpting Today!* to be a beacon of honesty and courage. Not just another cosy little magazine in our cosy little world."

Rhiannon was still doubtful.

"But an outsider? How could they possibly understand?"

Adrian was keen to mollify her.

"OK, well how about you choose someone?"

Rhiannon's eyes fell on me and her brow cleared.

"Sara, you do it! Of course, that's perfect!"

No, no, no, no, no! Everything in me cried out against this terrible idea.

Now it was Adrian's turn to look doubtful.

"Really?"

I tried not to be insulted, couldn't blame him really. Rhiannon laughed.

"Oh, take no notice of her today, that's my fault. Shouldn't have made her match me on the Rioja last night. Normally, she's brilliant. And she writes beautifully. She knows all my stuff too."

No, no, no, please no!

To my relief, Adrian was still reluctant.

"She's your friend. How objective can she be?"

Rhiannon batted away his concern.

"That's OK. Sara, you'll write what you actually think, won't you? No need to butter me up, you never have before. I'm not afraid of anyone's opinion."

"um, I'm not sure that..I mean.."

No, no, no, no, no! That's what I really meant.

"Ah, come on. You know you love doing this sort of thing. It'll be fun."

Adrian eventually capitulated. He handed me a business card.

"Well, OK. Give it a try, Sara. Send me something and I'll see what I think."

Suddenly, this seemed to be happening with or without me.

"How long?"

"Oh, five hundreds words or so should do it."

"Hmm, sorry. I meant, how long before you need it?"

"Oh, no real rush, next couple of weeks should be fine. Ideally, I'd like it for the February edition."

Rhiannon interjected happily. "Well, that's marvellous. Come on, Sara, we ought to get going. Or do you need longer to look at the figures now you'll be writing about them? We could always get a later train."

I declined. I had already seen more than I wanted to.

*

Rhiannon chattered happily on, most of the way back. She was pleased with the way her beautiful figures were being treated and she was almost as pleased with her brilliant idea of having me review them.

"It'll be great having you write something for Adrian. He's a terrific editor."

She paused and then smiled wickedly.

“Just as well, he’s a terrible sculptor. The move sideways was definitely the right thing for him.”

When the train stopped at Chatham, Rhiannon rose to get off. I was unspeakably thankful that I had already arranged with Robin that he would pick me up three stations further on. She enveloped me in an enormous hug and strode off into her world like a Colossus.

I fled back to the heart of my family.

Chapter Eight

Nothing happened immediately and Nate began to wonder if the whole sculpting idea would just fizzle out. In the meantime, he and Mindy had other, more pressing concerns. Mindy was increasingly preoccupied. The submission deadline for her dissertation was drawing ever closer and still she was busy at work with a long client list and a full timetable. Outside of the gym, she spent every spare moment at the laptop.

As far as Nate could see, she was keeping on top of things reasonably well; she was a good self-starter and her organisational skills were superb. But he did worry that she left too little time for herself. She was getting up an hour earlier in the morning - they hadn't shared their shaving ritual for weeks - and she went straight back to the keyboard when she got home in the evening.

He was happy to take over the cooking chores but he insisted that once dinner was ready, she clear everything away and spend an hour or two with him eating and watching telly, maybe with a glass of wine or a bottle of Sol. Often, she would get him to quiz her. He knew, well, nothing about the effects of exercise on carbohydrate metabolism and glucose tolerance but she said that explaining things to him made them clear in her own mind.

She would generally do a bit more after he had gone to bed. He tried objecting to this but she just laughed. Besides, he could see that it would be counter-productive to stop her, she would only get more stressed.

He fully supported her, he really did, but it was hard not to get bored from time to time.

"You're treating this place like a hotel, you know?" he griped, one Sunday morning after he had stooped to pick up jeans and a top left on the floor beside the bed.

Mindy looked up briefly from the laptop. She was frowning.

"..fuck's sake, Nate, it's only a few more weeks. Leave the bloody clothes on the floor, if it pains you that much. I'll get them later."

His mumbling reply was not quite inaudible and her temper flashed.

"*What?*" she snapped.

"Nothing. I'm wrong. Don't worry about it. I'm wrong, OK?"

"Oh Jesus, spare me the martyrdom, whatever you do." She actually rolled her eyes at him.

"I'm just saying. Sorry, I'm wrong, OK? I'm wrong, same as usual."

Mindy abruptly got up from the table and started to rifle through their boot box.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Going out," she replied, sitting on the floor to pull her trainers on.

"Where?"

"Dunno. Out. Around the common, maybe."

She had come back about an hour later. He was by then genuinely contrite but she admitted that, actually, he might have had a bit of a point.

After that, Sunday became their day. They would set off on a walk around London, have a picnic or a pub lunch somewhere and get back in the late afternoon. Mindy, did, at least, know all about the value of regular exercise for maintaining both physical and mental health. On Sunday evenings, she would sort through a bit of data, maybe talk through some tricky points with him. But that was all.

Now and again, Nate wondered when or if Rhiannon would contact him. For a couple of weeks after the exhibition, he heard nothing from her and he half-suspected - half-hoped, really - that she'd gone cold on the notion. He had her number, he could have called her but, somehow, he didn't want to. The whole idea was still freaking him out a bit. The possibility that she, herself, might change her mind had a certain appeal. But in the second half of April, her name finally flashed up on his mobile and together they settled on a date when she would come to Mottram's. He could find no sensible reason to refuse.

The following Thursday, Nate pitched up at the riding school. It was a beautiful afternoon but, wound up and apprehensive, he hardly saw it. He'd booked an hour's lesson with Malc plus an extra thirty minutes when he would be free to continue with Loveflower in the outdoor school. Rhiannon had said she would turn up at some point, armed with a digital camera. She was keen to get some pictures of the two of them galloping and going over jumps.

Somewhat to Nate's surprise, the lesson went well. He took a firm hold of himself and was able to channel his adrenaline into a better-than-usual performance. He and his pretty horse sailed over the modest jumps time and time again.

Malc, well aware of what was going on, was keen to capitalise on Nate's good form.

"Nate, you're going great guns," he called. "What do you say, put 'em up another six inches?"

Nate was feeling on top of the world, just at that moment.

"Sure. Why the hell not?"

By the time Rhiannon arrived, Nate was flying over jumps at least a foot higher than he'd ever dared try before.

After the formal lesson was over, Malc stood with Rhiannon at the perimeter of the school, chatting to her whilst she took dozens of stills of Nate and Loveflower. He was happy to offer some unofficial expertise, suggesting better angles to shoot and

calling to Nate with suggestions for the most advantageous approaches to take around the jumps.

Gradually, a small crowd was drawn to watch the display. Nate was well-known - the school got a lot of mileage out of his association with them - and now here was this notorious and striking local artist in their midst, as well. For half an hour, it felt as if the circus had come to town.

Nate positively glowed in the spotlight. As much as he appreciated blending into the background at the riding school, it was a rare and heady feeling to have an audience so completely on his side. His experience of public exposure generally ran from the subtly uncomfortable to the physically painful.

By half past three, both he and Loveflower had had enough. He trotted her gently over to the watching crowd.

“That’s it, I think,” he said to Rhiannon. “Loveflower’s about done and so am I. You got what you need?”

Rhiannon was beaming as she stroked the horse’s nose.

“Oh yes,” she answered with enthusiasm. “Easily, I reckon. There’s loads of lovely pics, I can’t wait to go through them.” She carried on petting the animal. “You’re such a beautiful girlie, aren’t you?”

“So what next?” asked Nate.

“I’ve got to run, just now,” she replied. “Need to get back before my younger mammal gets home from school but I tell you what I’ll do. I’ll go through it all in the next few days and pick out four or five that I think are suitable. Then between us, we can decide on the definitive pose. That OK?”

Nate leant forward, swung his right leg and slid neatly out of the saddle - a feat that drew a spontaneous ripple of applause from the small audience.

“Fine by me,” he replied. “What will you do? Email me the images?”

“Well, I could do that, if you want. But, to be honest, I think we’ll come to a much better understanding if we go through them together. Why don’t I come up to you one evening? Your lovely wife can have a look too, if she wants.”

“OK,” said Nate, starting to walk Loveflower towards the stables, “that sounds like a plan. Let me know once you’re ready and we’ll work out a date. You still got my email address?”

Rhiannon rifled through her capacious shoulder bag.

“It..should be..here...somewhere..”

Nate grinned. He was starting to recognise a pattern.

“Don’t worry about it. you can always just text me.”

She carried on rummaging in her bag.

“OK, will do. See you soon.”

*

Rhiannon was as good as her word. At lunchtime only ten days later, she messaged Nate to say that she’d picked out a few pictures that she really liked and did he want to see them? A few texts flew back and forth and it was arranged that she would come up to Lewisham that very evening.

When he got in from the Bureau, he was surprised to find Mindy already at the table with several books in front of her. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head as he shed his rucksack on to the floor.

“Hello, love, how goes it?”

She arched her back and stretched her arms up around his neck, trying to ease the study cramps. She smiled wearily.

“Not bad, actually. The brain seems to be ticking over pretty well today.”

“How come you’re home so early?”

“Derek cancelled, he’s got a cold.”

She kept her tone light but Nate instantly understood her good mood. Derek was a pain. He grinned back at her.

“What a shame, eh? Cup of tea?”

Mindy stood and stretched again.

“I’ll make it, time I took a break. You going for a run in a bit?”

“Yes. In fact, scrub the tea, I’d better go now. Rhiannon’s turning up at some point with a few pictures for us to look at.”

“Oh cool! What time?”

“Eight-ish, she reckoned. She’s going to text once she’s on the DLR. I’ll go and meet her.”

Half past eight saw Nate and Rhiannon walking up Lewisham Hill in the last rays of the sunset, back to Primrose Rise. In front of Armoury Court, Nate stopped and pushed the third in a line of six door buzzers. Rhiannon looked the dingy, three storey building up and down.

“This yours?”

“Home sweet home,” he replied. “At least, one room and half a bathroom is.”

The intercom buzzed. “*Hello?*”

Nate leaned in to speak into the receiver. “Hi, love, it’s us.”

The front door clicked open. Nate led the way in and straight up the bare boards of a flight of stairs. At the top was a hallway. Immediately to the left was a front door (number 2a), with a tiny bathroom adjacent, directly at the top of the stairs. The hallway continued around to the right, past another front door, to a second flight of stairs up to the top storey.

Nate pushed the door to the bathroom a little further open.

“There’s the loo, if you need it. Come on, this is us.”

He pushed open the door to 2a. In their bedsit, Mindy was still at the table. She looked up from the laptop and smiled.

“Hi Rhiannon, nice to see you again.”

“You too.” Rhiannon stood in the middle of the bedsit and looked curiously around the cramped room. “This reminds of my old flat in Dulwich a bit,” she continued. “You got the whole floor?”

“Well..sort of,” replied Nate. “There’s supposed to be someone in the other bedsit..”

“Studio apartment, pur-lease,” interrupted Mindy. Nate smiled at her.

“Oh, pardon me. There’s supposed to be someone in the other *studio apartment* but no-one ever stays very long.”

“Sounds ideal,” Rhiannon grinned.

“It is really,” agreed Mindy. “We get the bathroom all to ourselves. Much nicer.”

“Still costs an arm and a fucking leg though,” growled Nate.

Rhiannon laughed loudly for a second but broke off quickly and said, “I don’t know how anyone can afford to live in London any more.”

“We can’t really,” admitted Mindy. “Come on, I’ll clear some space. Let’s have those pictures, Rhiannon. Do you want a drink or something? Have you eaten yet?”

“I grabbed something on my way out, thanks,” said the other woman. “Cup of tea, perhaps?”

Nate put the kettle on while Mindy moved her books over to the bed and Rhiannon extracted a folder from her bag. From the folder she took some large glossy prints, which she spread on the table. Mindy bent over them and squealed with pleasure.

“Oh Nate, come and look, these are just lovely.” She smiled up at Rhiannon. “Gorgeous pictures, you are clever.”

Rhiannon was equally happy, “I know, they’re beautiful, aren’t they?” She pointed to one, “Look at that, isn’t it fabulous? I sent the JPEGs to a friend of mine, asked him for some good close-ups. He’s done a lovely job.”

Nate put two mugs of tea down on the table and then went back for the third.

“Rhiannon, do you take sugar?” he asked, “Wow, these *are* nice.”

The three of them pored over the photographs. There were five in total. Two were of Nate and Loveflower in a gallop and the other three showed the pair of them going over fences.

“It’s a tough choice,” said Mindy, at last. “They’re all fantastic, I’d love to see any of them as a statue.”

“That one’s my favourite,” said Nate, picking up the picture of himself sitting high on Loveflower as she galloped around the school.

“That *is* nice,” mused Rhiannon, taking it from him, “but I think this one would make a better sculpture. The lines flow so beautifully.”

She pointed at a picture in which Loveflower had just launched herself at a jump. The horse was straining eagerly up and forward. Nate was leaning low, urging her on, his torso held at an angle that mirrored the line of the animal’s powerful body.

“Well,” shrugged Nate, “you’re the expert. Mindy?”

“Fine by me,” she concurred. “It’s gorgeous.”

Rhiannon beamed. “Well, that’s settled it then. Fantastic.”

*

Nate found himself more excited by the whole thing than he would have expected. He had no idea how long it would take Rhiannon to make a model of him and Loveflower in clay. He wondered whether or not it would be particularly difficult to do someone like him. Why should it be? Just a question of following the photograph, surely? Same as modelling anything a little unfamiliar - a hippopotamus, say, or a penny farthing. He assumed that you couldn’t rush the job but still, he found himself impatient to know how she was getting on.

He didn’t have to wait long. About a week after her visit to their bedsit, Rhiannon telephoned the Bureau.

“Hi, it’s me. Rhiannon.”

Nate, at that time, was trying to lead a bewildered pensioner through the maze that was the bedroom tax. He glanced up at the office clock - ten past eleven.

“Rhiannon, hi. Look, it’s not a good time. Can I call you back?”

“Oh this won’t take long. It’s just that I’m having trouble understanding your..”

“Rhiannon. I’m with a customer. I’ll have to call you back.”

“That’s fine, but I just need you to come down here one day if..”

“Rhiannon, I said I’m with a customer. I’ll call you back.”

Nate hung up the telephone and turned back to the pensioner. After half an hour or so, he had unravelled the astonishing tangle the old man had made of his affairs and had written out, in large black capitals, step-by-step instructions that he hoped were sufficiently fool-proof.

Once the elderly gentleman had left, still muttering a little, Nate returned the call.

“Rhiannon, OK, what can I do for you? How’s it going?”

She was eating something but disposed of it rapidly.

“Oh hello, thanks for calling back. I’m so sorry about earlier. I hope I didn’t screw things up for you too much. I really didn’t mean to..”

"That's fine, Rhiannon. What's up?"

"Nothing terrible, it's going fine, on the whole. At least, Loveflower’s looking lovely - so gorgeous, isn’t she? - but I’m having trouble with your arms.”

“You and me both, love,” Nate grunted good-humouredly.

There was a moment of silence and then Rhiannon continued.

“Um, yes, I suppose so. Look, I know I’ve got the photographs and everything but I just can’t get to grips with the anatomy of them. Not with your shirt on.”

“What is it you need to know?”

“Well, it’s not really what I need to *know*. More what I need to *see*. I really need to have a good look at you. Get a handle on what you’ve actually got and what bits go where.”

“That sounds alarming. What do you suggest?”

“Could you possibly pop down here one afternoon, say, and let me draw you for an hour or two?”

She was talking quickly, as she always did. He had a little trouble hearing her, perhaps the line was dodgy.

"I'd, um, need you to take your shirt off for a bit, got to see your shoulders properly."

"Er..I'm not sure I'm entirely comf..."

"I know, it sounds a bit gratuitous, doesn't it? It's not, I promise you it's not. This is why my stuff is so good. I get the anatomy exactly right. I mean *exactly*. Even if the model's fully dressed, underneath, the bodily architecture is precise. And, so far, I just don't understand your arms. So I can't make them look right at all."

Nate didn't much like this idea but he could understand the logic of the request.

"W-e-e-ll, I s'pose that would be OK," he said, eventually. "How about Saturday?"

"Does it have to be Saturday? I'm driving my son to a rugby match.

"I'm working all week."

"What about Sunday?" she suggested.

"Can't do Sunday."

"Sunday really would be so much better for me." She was persuasive.

"I can't do Sunday." He wasn't budging.

She was obviously a little put out but, after a moment's consideration, capitulated.

"Hmm, that's awkward. OK, if you absolutely can't do Sunday (really? You sure?), let's say Saturday morning. Early-ish. Could you be here for nine?"

"I expect so but where's here?" He had no idea where she lived.

"That's a little difficult to explain." She was close to laughing, he had no idea why. "Tell you what, can you get yourself to Chatham station for about nine o'clock?"

Nate searched his memory but came up blank.

"Probably. Where's Chatham?"

She laughed again, overtly this time.

"Kent. Medway Towns. Few stops down from Bromley South."

“Ah, OK. That should be OK. I’ll have to check the times.”

“Great, I’ll pick you up from Chatham station. Nine-ish.”

“OK. I’ll let you know if that doesn’t work.”

She was delighted.

“That’s wonderful. Better wear a green carnation, so I can recognise you.”

Nate found himself smiling as he hung up.

*

On Saturday morning, Nate took the train to Chatham. It turned out that the 07.56 from Lewisham went straight through Chatham on its way to Gillingham, wherever that was. He’d thought it was in Somerset. He was on his own. Mindy had said that of course she’d come with him, if he really needed her, but it was obvious that she’d rather stay with her books. What did he have to worry about anyway? He’d met Rhiannon often enough now.

By half past nine, he was getting out of Rhiannon’s Mitsubishi pickup and following her along a rough track to the edge of a small creek where two long barges were moored, nose to tail. They walked past a paddock; two horses grazed while chickens scratched around their hooves. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting but it certainly wasn’t this.

A man was striding across the gangway of the bigger barge, hurrying, obviously on his way out.

“Darling,” called Rhiannon, “here we are.” She turned to Nate. “This is John, my husband.”

John dropped a kiss on his wife’s cheek, threw a charming - but essentially uninterested - smile at Nate and went on his way. Nate wondered if his wife often brought home strange men that she picked up in London. He’d seemed totally unfazed.

“Don’t mind John,” said Rhiannon, cheerily, as the two of them walked towards the smaller barge. “If it isn’t work, he doesn’t really notice it.”

“That’s handy. What does he do?”

“He’s got his own business. It’s all about supplying and integrating the power, monitoring and control systems in boats and other off-grid locations.”

“Oh..right. So, do you live here?”

Rhiannon pointed to the bigger barge. “We live on that one. Scheherazade. Beautiful, she is. I’ll show you round, if we’ve got time. This one’s my studio.” She led the way into the smaller barge.

“Nice.”

“It is,” she agreed. “Takes a while to warm up though, even in summer. I put the heater on first thing. Hope it’ll be OK for you.”

The barge gave a long thin space that, all told, was probably much the same size as the bedsit at Armoury Court. It was deftly fitted out with basic kitchen facilities. There was a separate living area with a bed deck cleverly built into a corner and a loo off to one side.

The main space was crammed with an astonishing assortment of things. Big hunks of metal and wood, tools, pictures, small model figures. There was even an old safe, squatting on the floor with its door hanging open and a lamp standing on top. Nate was fascinated, this was so far removed from anywhere else he’d ever been. He wandered around the space, taking it all in.

“Is it warm enough?”

“What? Oh..yes, that’s fine, thanks.”

Rhiannon moved to the end of the barge to switch off the heater. There was silence for a couple of moments.

“Well,” she continued, eventually “how about I make us both a cup of tea while you see if you’ll still be warm enough without your shirt on?”

She turned her back on him and hurried to the little kitchen space, noisily filling the kettle and washing out mugs. Nate stood stock still for a few moments more. Then he took a couple of deep breaths and shrugged his T-shirt over his head. He had put a running vest on underneath his shirt. He wasn’t sure why. Racer-backed, it concealed nothing. Rhiannon approached with two mugs of steaming liquid. She nodded approvingly.

“The vest’s a good idea. Should ward off hypothermia for a little longer. You can always take it off later, if necessary.”

She walked around him slowly, studying his shoulder girdle intently from all angles. Nate felt - as he had felt so often before - like a flea under a microscope. He never got used to it, even after so many years and so many doctors. He could feel himself reddening and hoped the blush would die down before she noticed. Luckily, Rhiannon was far too occupied with his aberrant anatomy to look much at his face.

“What do you call it?” she suddenly asked.

Nate raised his eyebrows.

“What do I call what?”

“What it is you’ve got. I mean, I know everyone just says thalidomide but it must have a proper name, this - er - particular arrangement of your arms.”

“It does, “ he answered, shortly, “but I don’t like it. Just thalidomide is fine, thanks.”

“Why? What is it?”

Nate frowned hard for a moment or two. Eventually, he replied, “Phocomelia. I'm phocomelic. I have phocomelia of both my arms.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad. Bit more dignified than thalidomide, wouldn’t you say? Why don’t you like it?”

“Do you know what it means?”

Rhiannon shook her head, she was looking closely at his left upper arm, not paying his words a vast amount of attention.

“It means ‘seal-limbed’,” explained Nate with an audible degree of entrenched bitterness. “Some bloody professor somewhere thought it was entirely OK to call us ‘seal-limbed’. Because our arms and legs - not my legs, actually - apparently resemble flippers. So no, I wouldn’t say it was more dignified than thalidomide, would you?”

“I guess not,” Rhiannon murmured, still mainly elsewhere. “So what do you prefer to call yourself then?”

“A human being?” suggested Nate, with a touch of acerbity.

Rhiannon flicked her blue eyes past his shoulder for a second, her expression distant.

“But, still, you must have a name for it. Just practically, you’d need one.”

Nate smiled wickedly for a second.

“‘Thalidomiders’ is probably the most widely used. But a whole bunch of us used to call ourselves the Triple Fs.”

“The Triple Fs?” Rhiannon’s brow furrowed. “What does that mean?”

“The Fully-Fledged Flids.”

Rhiannon gasped and then, a beat later, laughed appreciatively.

“Oh! That’s dreadful.”

“Hmph, that’s nothing. Guess what my band was called, back in the day.”

“I dread to think. Go on.”

“Trippin’ the Cripple.”

Rhiannon laughed again, her closed fist to her mouth.

“What were you? Lead singer?”

“Fuck no. That was Keith - you met him at the museum, remember? I can’t carry a tune in a bucket. Mind you,” Nate continued thoughtfully, “we were Punks so that wouldn’t have mattered really.”

“So what did you do?”

“Drummer.”

“*Really?* Sorry, I mean, you can manage..?”

“Not bad. I mean, I’m no Paul Cook but I do OK. I was determined that I was going to *do* something in the band. Not just be the freak show at the front.”

“You were proper Punks? Mohicans? Safety pins?”

“Oh yes, bondage trousers, the lot. They were a bloody nuisance, mind you.”

Nate grew nostalgic whilst Rhiannon set to work with a sketch book and pencil.

“It was the fag end of the Seventies, of course we were Punks. We thought we were going to pull down the world. We - me and Keith and a couple of others - had tried being a Rock band but that just didn’t quite work for us.”

He smiled impishly, looking down at his hands as he spread his fingers.

“For a start, it took me ages to embroider anything on to my denim jacket and then it always looked shit, anyway. But Punk - that was different. I always wanted to be Ian Dury. I used to carry a copy of Lord Upminster around in a Rough Trade carrier bag.” His face clouded, “Till some bastard mugged me on a bus. I bet he wished he’d never bothered. A second rate LP and a bottle of anti-spasmodics. He was never going to get high on those.”

“Was it a success? The band, I mean.”

Nate smiled. “We were certainly notorious, if nothing else. Very well known in the Eltham area for a year or so. We had a few proper fans - plus a whole bunch of thugs who would come to our gigs just to kick the shit out of the spastic afterwards.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh yes. I ended up in Casualty more times than I can count.” He grinned again, wiggling his eight digits. “In the end, Keith got his skull fractured; he

was trying to pull some big bastard off me and got thrown across the street. That was when we decided it just wasn't worth it."

"Trippin' the Cripple." Rhiannon tried the name, thoughtfully. "It's good, it *sounds* good. It's still dreadful, though. You'd never let anyone else call you a cripple."

Nate wagged his head, noncommittally.

"Mm, I'd almost rather that than phocomelic, really. And I'd *definitely* rather be called a cripple than an invalid."

Rhiannon was still sketching.

"Well, you're not really an invalid, are you? I mean, you're not ill."

"That's not what I meant. I just don't like the word - invalid."

"Mmm?" she said, vague again, now studying his right arm.

Nate started to get a little agitated.

"Think about it. *Think* about it. Invalid. In-valid. Not valid, someone who is not valid. That's just..appalling but no-one seems to notice."

"I s'pose," replied Rhiannon, her mind clearly elsewhere. "Listen, your two arms are basically the same, aren't they? As far as I can tell. You've got no thumbs on either hand, no elbows at all but a sort of dinky arm with a hand on the end. That right?"

"That's pretty much it," concurred Nate. "If you look at x-rays of my arms - I've had hundreds of x-rays - I've got a small humerus on each side, they're an odd shape but they're there. Forearms completely missing and then, yes, most of a wrist and hand stuck on the end. It's about the same each side."

"Are you left or right-handed?"

Nate gave a short bark of laughter.

"Fuck knows. I'm right-footed though."

Rhiannon was still looking at his arms.

"Do you all, um, do all thalidomiders have the same sort of pattern?"

"No. You can get all sorts of different patterns. It's usually legs too. Plus other problems." He smiled without any trace of humour. "I got off pretty lightly, in a way."

"You're face is normal," remarked Rhiannon, matter-of-factly, "That makes a vast difference."

Nate blinked, once or twice.

"You think?"

"Oh yes, for sure. Look, can I make some more sketches? You're not in a rush, are you?"

"Me? No. But don't you have a rugby match to get to?"

"Oh, that's OK, I managed to rearrange. Might take some photos too, if you don't mind."

He was only slightly surprised.

"You rearranged the match? Really?"

"Nooo, you twonk. The transport. A friend's taking him for me."

Chapter Nine

To: adrian.malakar@sculptingtoday.co.uk

Cc: rhiannon@hughes.btinternet.com

Subject: Review for Sculpting Today!

3rd January, 2013 10.37

From: spagson@yahoo.com

The Vigour exhibition at the The Jewish Museum in Camden Town is stunning. Two works of heart-stopping power and beauty soar into the dark space. They seem to reach out to the corners of the room, claiming the place as their rightful home.

Rhiannon Hughes has long produced sculptures that embody her ideals of humanity's spirit and physique. They are, fittingly, larger than life-sized. Her representational work is accurate to every wrinkle of skin and fold of cloth, yet at the same time, empathic enough to invite the viewer into the soul of the subject.

Her more recent work is less directly representational but still conveys the form of the human body with impressive complexity. The lateral shift of the lower leg as a footballer runs on it, the slide of the scapula around the thoracic cage as an arm stretches out - these are unerring, uncommon observations.

Her current technique uses strips of stainless steel, aligned in bundles to form the muscular planes of the body. The thick steel strips must be wrenched, by hand, into the subtle curves needed. The process requires considerable controlled strength; it requires the artist's domination over the elements with which she works.

The exhibition comprises two works. The first, ManMaid, depicts two human figures, ballet dancers or gymnasts, arching through each other, completing each other to form an ecstatic unity. The second, Colli, is a young woman looking out, as if for a ship lost. A woman with bee-stung lips and a mane of hair blowing behind her. Her delicate, even frivolous appearance juxtaposes unsettlingly with the brute strength of the technique used to create her.

Together, the figures demonstrate the inseparable intertwining of Hughes' supreme technical ability with her vision. Walking around these demigods, we slowly become aware of an attempted seduction. We are being glimmered by a world that looks like ours yet is not ours. This is how people could be. More than that (the artist's point of view is quite clear), this is how people *should* be. Beauty wrought from strength and domination. It is a fantasist's world, maybe even a fetishist's world. A

world that is so much smaller than the one we actually inhabit.

Ultimately, I am unable to escape a sense of almost eugenic purism. At its empty heart, ManMaid is a narrow-minded denial of the reality of man- and womankind, in our glory and in our squalor. A denial of the ordinary, the worn, the broken, the merely differently-shaped. It is only one step removed from the glossy magazines that depict everyone as forever young and thin, with perky tits and great hair. Any variation from this depressingly conventional view is simply disregarded.

In the end, Vigour is a beautiful, reactionary denial of humanity.

<send>

*

I heard nothing for a couple of days but eventually, Adrian called me at home. I had been expecting his response since the instant I hit "send" and I wasn't looking forward to it. After I spewed out my feelings about ManMaid on to the screen, I had read it over several times and realised, with horror, that it was the truth as I knew it. I had been feeling sick and somewhat tremulous at the thought of it ever since.

"I can't publish this."

His discomfort was evident, even along a poor telephone line. I shrugged (not that he could see it), a decent simulacrum of indifference.

"Then don't."

In fact, I was almost desperate for him to reject the review. To take the responsibility for this horrible truth out of my hands. But at the same time, I wanted it shouting from the rooftops. This widespread hood-winking of the world at large sickened me to my core. At that moment, articulate speech was largely out of my grasp. I have a coward's dislike of saying unpleasant things.

"I mean, it's practically slanderous."

That, at any rate, was easy enough to swat away.

"You mean libellous, surely? And it's not. There are no incorrect facts in it."

There was a short phase while he thought about that.

"All right, then, if you must. It's calumnious. You can't deny that, at least. You're basically accusing her of being a Nazi."

"I'm not accusing her of anything. Just describing how it looks from where I sit. That's what a review is, surely? Anyone may have an opinion."

"*The artist's point of view is quite clear.* That's a helluva statement. How can you get that just from looking at two figures?"

"It's clear enough to me. I'm familiar with the whole canon of Rhiannon's work. Can't help but see her bigger picture."

"Hmm."

There was another pause and then he continued to rebuke me.

"That's not exactly the outsider's point of view I had in mind, when I commissioned you."

"That's not my problem, Adrian. This whole thing was your idea, not mine." I was getting a little defensive. "What do you want me to do? Pretend I haven't known her for thirty five years?" I sighed and tilted my head at the 'phone. "Look, what exactly is it you disagree with?"

I could almost hear him shifting uneasily.

"It's not that I disagree with any of it exactly. It's a pithy piece of writing, can't say it isn't. But the overall impression is so..defamatory, I suppose. Could you not, at least, remove the sentence about eugenics?"

His request deserved due consideration.

"No," I decided, eventually. "That's the heart of it. You print that or you print none of it." Suddenly, I was tired of this discussion. "Are you seriously telling me that *Sculpting Today!* prints only favourable reviews? That's basically censorship. And anyway, it's not really an unfavourable review. I've made it very clear that her talent is unsurpassed."

"Oh yes and aligned it to a highly provocative subtext," agreed Adrian, glumly. "The crowds will flock, you mark my words."

"You're objecting to that?"

He had one final question.

"Sara, is that really what you think? Is that really how she seems to you?"

I couldn't articulate an answer to this. I muttered something useless, left it with him and hung up.

*

I heard nothing from Rhiannon. Nothing at all, which surprised me. By her own lights, I had been expecting a confrontation of some sort. For two weeks, the silence drove me mad.

Eventually, I sent her a text: **Should we talk?**

The reply came a couple of days later: you know where i am

So I drove south.

*

It was windy again at Halstead's Wharf. It's always windy there. The wind off the North Sea whips across the flat estuarine land with nothing to stop it. The place appears to stand alone against the wind, but a look at the map will show you that the wharf is actually nicely sheltered, safely tucked in behind the Isles of Sheppey and Grain. It's practically cosy.

There was no-one in Scheherazade so I tried the new studio. I started across the gangway of the smaller barge, my boot heels clanging on the rusty metal. Rhiannon was inside. It looked as if she was working on a maquette but she must have heard my approach. By the time I had negotiated the gangway and entered the studio proper, she was sitting on a stool, hands on her knees, watching me silently as I crossed the space. I approached until I was a few feet away and then stopped, facing her.

It was cold in the studio. She was wearing thick denim and red checked flannel over base layers. Her hair, changed since Christmas, was also red and very short. Her eyes looked dark, almost blue-grey. I've never really believed the romantic notion that angry eyes get darker. But I suppose changes in blood flow to the irises or retinas behind could give the appearance of a deeper colour. That day, Rhiannon's eyes were definitely not the cornflower blue of summer skies that I usually saw.

Neither of us said a word.

Eventually, she tried.

"What made you..?"

She broke off, unsure exactly how to phrase her question. But I knew what she was asking. I managed to unearth my tongue from the desert floor of my mouth and tried to answer her.

"Um..a lot of things, I think. All suddenly rushed together. It was that man on the train, though, who really.."

I stopped. I had to, my heart was hammering and breaking in my chest. Rhiannon was looking at me, puzzled.

"On the train? The one with..without..the one in the wheelchair."

I nodded; I still couldn't speak.

"But I didn't say anything."

"I think that was it." All of a sudden, I found my voice. "He was so amazing. And quite a nice-looking lad actually. You bang on about strength - and muscles - *all* the time..I mean, good Lord, he had some muscles on him..it seemed astonishing that you didn't have some comment to make, one way or another."

Rhiannon said nothing so I went on.

"You *did* see it, didn't you? How strong must he have been? To do what he did. In front of the whole carriage. Not to mention the balance and co-ordination it needed. I didn't realise till then that you have such a..such a narrow view."

"I'm an artist. I appreciate beauty and symmetry. There's nothing wrong with that." She wasn't quite gritting her teeth.

"No, there isn't. Nothing wrong at all. But you don't appreciate beauty. I don't think you even see most of it. You just worship a very tiny part of it. And strength too, I think. They're inseparable to you. Like idols. But they're not idols, they're just..things. Neutral *things*."

I looked across at the maquette she had been working on. A boxer but a female figure, unmistakably. One eighth size, I remember thinking vaguely. Which must have been quite wrong. She was exquisite. Strength and grace and movement, all powerfully depicted. She wasn't finished but you could already see what she would become. Beautiful. Perfect and beautiful.

As I looked at the figure, new thoughts crowded in on me, making me restless. I started to pace around the studio.

"It's all so...dead."

This finally sparked Rhiannon into life. She stood up, her eyes and, (it felt like) her teeth too, flashing at me.

"*Dead?! How on earth can you call that..*" she flung her arm at the maquette, "*..dead? Look at her, she's perfect. A perfect realisation of a perfect human form down to the last fibre. If she were any more alive, she'd jump down from the table and knock seven shades of shit out of you.*"

She shook her head in seeming despair.

"You can't see it, can you? You just don't have the vision. You can't see..you can't *feel* the sublime perfection."

She poked her face forward at me, challenging me to reply.

"I don't have your vision, certainly," I concurred, sitting down on the stool she had vacated. "OK, maybe not dead, maybe that's the wrong word." I spun round on the stool a couple of times, groping for difficult ideas. "Dead end, that's closer. She's a dead end."

"What do you mean?"

"*You* look at her. Go on, look. I agree with you, believe me, I agree with you. She's perfect, absolutely perfect, completely perfect, perfectly complete."

"Yes. I know."

Rhiannon was clearly bewildered. Her brow furrowed whilst I looked up at her, desolate, for a long moment.

"That's just it. There's no room for growth, for chance, for evolution. For any kind of life at all."

I tried to explain but the concepts were tricky and the emotion wasn't helping.

"She's utterly..sterile. She goes nowhere. The only thing that could come of her is more of her. More of exactly the same. It's such a..an..ordinary, do I mean ordinary?, idea of beauty. No-one could possibly dislike it. When did you - *you of all people* - become so conventional?"

I ran out of steam for the moment and stood up again, unable to keep still. I was reeling a little from my own courage and my own noise. Sharp truths were raining down on me. Horrible possibilities were blossoming rapidly in my head like time-lapse images of a flourishing cancer. Rhiannon was looking at me starkly. Her masseters bulged a little.

"I don't get it, Rhi. *Why?*"

"Why what?"

"Why this over-powering need to make everyone the same? Have you so little faith in the world that you have to stamp everyone in it to your pattern? Eliminate every other possibility? What do you think - *let me finish!* - what do you think will happen if it's not you that bends every curve? If you let someone else decide their own reality? *What are you so afraid of?*"

Rhiannon was furious now. Her face was a study in compression - her eyes, her mouth almost totally hidden. She didn't answer. But she didn't have to. It was clear enough to me.

I was almost through. I had almost finished tearing to pieces one of the most precious things I had ever known. But one final thing struck me.

"Don't you worry about missing it? Maybe never hitting your full height?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" she said, scornfully. She looked across again at her beautiful maquette, as if in proof.

"I don't know, really," I replied, sad now. "Does it not seem to you that if you don't allow chance in, allow *life* in, you'll never get that chance-in-a-million alchemy? You'll never happen across that completely unpredictable thing that leads to the miracle? You'll end up dying in a cul-de-sac, with your row of beautiful, perfect, *irrelevant* shop floor dummies."

Finally, I rolled to a stop. I had nothing left to destroy and no defences of my own to erect. Rhiannon looked at me steadily.

"Dying?"

I looked straight back at her, nodded.

"Yes."

We both fell silent again for a few moments. Rhiannon drummed her fingers on the work top and I kicked sullenly at the leg supporting it. The maquette rattled slightly as if issuing a warning. The tiny noise appeared to provoke Rhiannon out of her furious silence.

"How dare you?" she said to me. She was calm and steady and very, very angry. "How *dare* you presume to tell me what I am? It's you who can't see things properly. You'll never know the ecstasy of creation, your soul is too small."

She picked up a small pair of needle-nosed pliers from the bench and levered them open and shut several times, put them down again.

"I don't rely on chance to provide miracles," she went on. "I make them for myself, out of thick steel. With my bare hands. *These* hands."

She bared them at me, clawed them at me. The skin was thick and scarred from years of contact dermatitis and small injuries.

I was sitting down again, head in hands. I shook that head wearily.

"I wish I were wrong," I said. I have loved you for so long, you know that. But," I started to stammer and a little salt water seeped onto my fingers, "I..I seem to have wasted my time."

"You *are* wrong." She was still calm but a little more insistent. "I'll prove it. I'll prove you wrong."

At that, I raised my head to look at her, interested, blinking a little.

"Go on then, prove it. How would you prove it?"

She shrugged. Her fingers fidgeted listlessly again with the blameless pliers.

"What do you expect me to do? Create something ugly, just to show you I can?"

"No..I want you to.." The idea was elbowing its way out of its shell, struggling into life in my head. "I want you to make something beautiful. I want you to find someone. A lumpy, clumsy, ordinary, everyday person, and show me that you can understand..understand..their right to their own context."

Rhiannon looked at me, pityingly. "You just want me to do someone fat or old. There's no challenge. I was doing life classes at sixteen."

"No, not that. That's not it. I...I don't know how to put it. I mean someone..someone who totally misses your ideal, someone *abhorrent* to you in some physical way and then really come to know them, until you understand how they exist, perfectly and completely, within their own solar system, or ecosystem, or whatever the hell it is I mean. However flawed they may look to you. When you understand that, maybe you'll make something beautiful that actually *lives*."

She snorted. "Inner beauty? The same old shit that everyone else is doing? I was right, your soul *is* too small. I'm not doing that. It would be a betrayal of my creativity."

I shrugged myself then and stood up. "Then don't, I don't care. I don't care what you do." To my surprise, I realised this was wholly true. "But if you do, if you do convince me, I'll have it. I'll buy it from you, full market price. That's only fair."

I walked across the studio, up the steps, through the door and out along the gangway.

"It would cost you," she called after me, standing in the studio doorway. "It would cost you thousands."

I turned round and looked at her whilst I walked backwards over the shivering metal path. The January wind made noodles of my hair. "I hope so. I really do."

I swivelled on my heels to face front and kept on walking. I never really expected to see her again.

*

Adrain published my piece in the February issue of *Sculpting Today!* He was right. The review slow-burned through the specialist sculpture press, into the wider artistic world and eventually to the fringes of the national reviews. It caused a medium-sized sensation, stoked in no small part by Rhiannon herself, vibrant and larger than life, responding energetically and articulately in several interviews. Everyone was mad to see this beautiful, brutal work by this beautiful, brutal artist. Vigour became, for a few heady weeks, the *cri du jour*.

Chapter Ten

By the middle of June, Mindy was, at last, approaching the end of her Masters course. She had sent off her dissertation a couple of weeks' previously and was typically stoic about its chances. She reckoned it would just about scrape a pass. Nate immediately figured that a distinction would shortly be forthcoming.

However, the final grade would not be decided until Mindy had undergone the *viva voce* examination. This was quite an ordeal. Mindy and the twelve other students on her course would each be required to spend thirty minutes in front of a sceptical pair of academics, justifying their research methods, defending their arguments and answering any tricky questions that the examiners saw fit to fire at them. All the *vivas* would take place in one momentous day in Middlesex and Mindy was far more wound up about this bit than she had ever been about writing the twenty thousand word dissertation.

She could see the point of it all, that wasn't the problem. Her job required that she communicate effectively with her clients, often about quite complicated and serious material. It was vital to ensure that she understood her subject and that she was able to get over important information succinctly and comprehensibly. Besides, it was all too possible, in this digital age, to purchase or plagiarise an entire dissertation and pass it off as your own. A detailed *viva* examination, though, would almost certainly trip up a fraudster.

It was a funny thing. Mindy was happy to talk to the public every day of the week. She got on swimmingly with almost all her clients and her waiting list was growing, rather than otherwise. But half an hour in front of two serious academics from the David Lloyd Institute of Physical Education? The idea terrified her. She said that most of her fellow students felt the same.

On these lengthening evenings, Nate would spend time asking Mindy as many questions as he could come up with. He had only a sketchy idea of what her dissertation was actually about and didn't understand half the answers she gave him so he didn't really feel helpful. But Mindy assured him that it was valuable for her simply to get used to talking out loud, to get used to the sound of her own voice promptly coming up with answers, no matter how nonsensical they might be.

They still kept their Sundays free though. It was turning out to be a glorious summer and they made the most of it, exploring London's surprising wealth of green spaces.

'Mindy, can you spare me next Friday evening?' Nate asked his wife, as they strolled together around Richmond Park on a sunny afternoon.

Mindy reached up her hand and tickled Nate's fingers, which lay on her left shoulder.

'Of course, what's the occasion?'

'Oh, no occasion really,' he replied. 'It's just that I've heard from Rhiannon. She says she's about finished the first attempt of me and Loveflower and wants us to come and look it over.'

This was less than a month after Nate had bared his arms for Rhiannon in her studio. It seemed the sculptor could work fast enough, once she'd set her mind to something.

"I should think she does," bridled Mindy, defensively. "She needs your approval before she can go any further."

The she relaxed and smiled up at her husband. "That's great though. I can't wait, can you? It should be gorgeous."

"Hmm, we'll see," was all Nate replied but he was smiling too. "Anyway, can you do next Friday? What are you working? I haven't definitely told her 'yes' yet."

"Should be all right. I've got classes until five, I think. That's not too late, is it?"

"Can't see why it would be." Nate was working things out in his head. "I'm at the Bureau that afternoon too. If we go straight from work and catch a train from Lewisham about half past five, we can be there for half six."

"That sounds good," agreed Mindy. "Why Friday, anyway?"

"Dunno," said Nate, "I didn't ask." He laughed briefly. "Knowing her, she probably hasn't *actually* finished it yet. Needs a few more days. Anyway," he went on "you sure it's OK? Your *viva*'s on the Monday after, isn't it? You sure you can spare Friday evening?"

"Yeah, it'll be all right." Mindy was reassuring. "I mean, it won't take long, will it? We'll be there for half past six, take a good skeg at the model for what? Half an hour? An hour at the very most, surely? We'll be back home for nine at the latest. You can test me for an hour or so and then we'll catch last orders at The Joiners." She smiled broadly. "How's that for a plan?"

He smiled right back at her. "It's a fine plan. OK, thanks, love. I'll let Rhiannon know we're coming."

*

On Friday evening, Nate and Mindy travelled to Chatham where they found Rhiannon already waiting for them in the Mitsubishi; Nate got in beside Rhiannon, with Mindy behind him. The three of them chatted easily enough during the twenty minute drive to Halstead's Wharf.

"I hope you don't mind, there's going to be a small party," said Rhiannon as they drove through Halstead village.

Nate felt his hackles rise.

"A party? I thought we were just coming to look at the model? If it's a bad time, you should have said. We could always have rearranged."

"No, no, no. The party's *for* the maquette. Sort of a launch party, if you like."

From the front seat, Nate heard Mindy lean forward towards him. He craned round to see her and from the expression on her face, he knew what she was thinking. Did this woman commemorate every possible event in her life? As he turned back to face front, his wife muttered into his left ear.

"It'll be the opening of an envelope next."

Rhiannon was still gabbling on.

"Only a few good friends, nothing extravagant. *Very* exclusive. It's just that there's been quite a lot of interest in this figure. I'm sure you understand."

"You've been talking to people about it?" asked Nate, surprised again.

Rhiannon flashed a smile at him.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I? It'll be nice. Just us three plus John and the boys, obviously. My friend Sara, who's sort of the reason I started all this. Then there's my editor, Adrian, plus a guy called Nick. Can't stand him, actually, but he works for the hiveMind Trust. They've already expressed an interest in purchasing the work."

"Oh, right," was all Nate said but it was enough for Mindy to cast an anxious look at him.

By now, Rhiannon had negotiated the Mitsubishi safely down the track to Halstead's Wharf. She parked the vehicle and switched off the engine. The three of them got out of the truck, Nate and Mindy loitering by the doors for a moment. Nate scratched Mindy's chin.

"This is making me itch," he said.

"I know. Me too. But I guess this is how her world works. Remember, you have the ultimate power. If you don't like it, you can walk away. End of."

Nate wrinkled his nose.

"It's not the model, really. I can't see how that will be anything but fine. It's just all this..." He waved his hands vaguely at the scene around them.

"Ridiculous tarradiddle? Yeah, I know. It's almost like she can't walk unless a fanfare announces her every step. But, it *is* the model that counts, isn't it?"

Nate nodded glumly.

"Tell you what, though," admitted Mindy. "Wish I'd put some mascara on."

The two of them followed Rhiannon down into the studio barge.

Inside, five people were loitering in the middle of the studio space. Nate recognised Rhiannon's husband, John, who was standing with two young men. He tried to remember if Rhiannon had told him their names. James - one was James, he was pretty sure. Slightly apart from these three, a dark-haired woman was talking to a short, dapper gentleman in a charcoal suit and orange socks.

Rhiannon ushered the two of them in.

"Everyone..everyone," she clapped her hands. "Let me introduce my guests of honour. I have had the utmost privilege for the last two months to work closely with this man. He's an brilliant athlete and I'm proud to show the world what he and his beautiful horse can do."

Nate would happily have disappeared into the floor at this point. Rhiannon dragged them to the table, set up at the side of the room. She picked up an open bottle of wine.

"Red or white? Go on, there's lots. Some eatables, too," she gestured at a couple of platters of colourful canapés.

"Got any beer?" asked Nate. The thought of white wine was making his stomach surge with acid.

"Oh. Not in here, but we might have some next door. Shall I.."

"No, that's fine. Honestly, it's fine. I'll have some red."

"Jimmy," called Rhiannon to her eldest son. "Jimmy, just nip next door, will you? See if we've got any Corona left. Oh and a lime too. Thanks, darling."

Mindy poured herself a large glass of Sauvignon Blanc and set to it with a determined air. By the time James returned with two lime-wedged beers - he gave one to Nate and kept one himself - she was already two-thirds of the way down it. Nate held his Corona against his chest and successfully poked the lime wedge down into the beer.

Rhiannon was drinking Rioja. She took Nate and Mindy over to something covered in a piece of old red velvet. It appeared to be a tall wooden stool with something atop it.

"Here it is," she said, her hands hovering, clearly dying to touch it. "We just need to wait for Nick. The bastard's always late, does love to make an entrance. Now then, I want you to meet someone."

She put out her hand and pulled in the dark-haired woman who had been talking to the dapper gent. She looked nothing like Rhiannon and yet, somehow, she gave off the same aura. The two women appeared to share - Nate couldn't quite put his finger on it - a heritage or a sense of certainty.

"Sara, come and meet the people I've been telling you about. You two, this is Sara. Just about my best friend for ever. We've known each other, what is it, Sara? Thirty years?"

Nate was feeling more and more gloomy. Yet another overly-entitled, middle-class snob who would fail to look him in the eye and then congratulate herself later for having talked nicely to the cripple.

But this one was different somehow. She was a lot less, hmm, *immediate* than her friend. She had a very definite air of watching, rather than joining in and she was certainly far less colourful. She looked nice but he couldn't really have said what she was wearing.

She smiled at the two of them and he steeled himself for that inevitable shifting gaze, conscious that he ought to try and be polite in this hothouse where he somehow seemed to have become the prize-winning exhibit.

But Sara looked at him in much the same way that Mindy had looked at him, the first time they met. A thorough appraisal up and down a couple of times and then, somehow, that was that. As if she had the measure of things. Nate was thoroughly unsettled but relieved, nonetheless.

"Mr Turner, I'm delighted to meet you. Rhiannon has waxed lyrical in your favour. This must be your wife?"

She sounded much like Rhiannon, same sort of posh, well-educated voice. Mindy, who was already a little tipsy, latched onto this friendly stranger with alacrity.

"Mindy. How d'you do? And, for fuck's sake, call him Nate. Are you an artist too? What do you do? Papier mâché or collage?"

Sara smiled broadly.

"Christ, no. I couldn't draw Hell in a handcart. Sorry, that's not right, is it? I'm already on my third glass. No, I'm, um, I'm a doctor."

That explained it. To healthcare professionals, Nate was not the discomfiting freak that he was to a lot of people. Mostly, he was just a collection of problems that needed solving. Sometimes, that was a blessed relief. Sometimes, it rather annoyed him.

"Ooh, what sort?" continued Mindy, delighted to meet a kindred spirit in this alien, over-heated environment. "I used to be a physiotherapist."

"Really?" asked Sara, with interest, "Not any more? What happened?"

"Agenda for Change."

"Ah." The two women nodded, enough said. "So what do you do now?"

"I'm a personal trainer. In a gym in Lewisham."

Sara made an approving sort of face.

"That seems a reasonable alternative. How do you find it?"

Before the two could embark upon a detailed discussion of the pros and cons of life in and out of the NHS, a heavy footfall on the gangway outside announced the coming of the last guest.

"Nick, darling, you're late!" Rhiannon walked up to the newcomer and kissed him soundly on both cheeks.

Nate muttered to Mindy, "Just as well she can't stand him."

"Oi!" admonished his wife, prodding him with her elbow. "Behave yourself!"

Sara had overheard the two of them. She swivelled her eyes toward them naughtily.

"If she actually *liked* him, they'd be on the floor by now."

Nate and Mindy suppressed smiles and, for the first time since they'd got off the train, Nate started to relax. Maybe he could breathe in this world after all. For a short spell, at least.

"Sorry, Rhiannon," said the man called Nick, with no visible contrition at all. "You know how it is, sometimes."

He was a big man in a dark, three-piece suit with a sharp chalk stripe and a dazzling white shirt that was all collar and cuffs. No tie.

"I know how *you* are," agreed Rhiannon, skittishly. "Come on, let me get you a drink and then we can open proceedings."

Nick stood his ground and ended up with a glass of water. Finally, Rhiannon judged the time to be right. She took centre stage.

"John."

Her husband stepped up to the stool and grasped the red velvet at a couple of strategic points.

"Everyone, thank you so much for coming. I would like to present the maquette that will be the template for what I'm confident will develop into a stunning, life-size work. This..is Synergy."

She nodded to John, who pulled away the cloth with a careful flourish. Everyone drew nearer. The clay figure was a meticulous representation of Nate riding Loveflower. The animal was resplendent on her hind legs, taking flight into a jump. Nate was bent low over her neck, urging her on and up.

For some long moments, no-one said anything. Everyone was studying the figure from different angles. Nate and Mindy circled it completely, three or four times.

"Beautiful modelling, Rhi," remarked Adrian, eventually. "As good as anything you've done."

John and the two boys were conferring quietly together. Sara, saying nothing, was looking at her feet. Nick, also, was saying nothing. He was looking at Rhiannon and Nate in turn, smiling quietly.

Rhiannon turned to Nate and Mindy with an eager smile.

"Well, what do you think? Isn't it beauti.."

She broke off abruptly as she saw the expression on Nate's face. The room fell completely silent.

Nate's brow was drawn right down, his mouth a thin, grim line. His fingers could be seen to be trembling.

"What on earth's the matter?"

He could see her distress but could hardly answer her. She was alarmed by his obviously unfavourable reaction and apparently at a total loss to understand it. He took some visible breaths and opened his mouth. For a second, nothing emerged. Then:

"You.." It was practically a hiss. "You..queen..bitch."

Rhiannon looked close to tears now.

"What is it? What?!" she screeched at him. "It's perfect! What's wrong with it?!"

Nate was silent again, shaking his head at her in appalled wonderment. Suddenly, he found a burst of energy.

"Come on, Mindy," he said to his wife. "I'm not staying here."

He started to walk out of the room. Half way to the door, he turned back to face the assembled company and spat some words straight at Rhiannon.

"Invalid. In-valid. Not valid. Not *fucking* valid. I've got you now, you cow. Don't you *ever* come anywhere near me again."

Nate strode out with his wife following him. She was also in tears.

"How could you do that to him?" was all she said before she disappeared after her husband.

Chapter Eleven

All that was four months ago.

Through a darkening January afternoon, I drove home from that terminal encounter with Rhiannon and started, I think, what was essentially a grieving process. You know about the five stages of grief, of course? Denial, anger, bargaining etc? Although, thinking about it, I didn't *start* the grieving process at that point. It was more that I finally started to move through it.

Really, I must have been in denial for years, even decades. How could I have known Rhiannon so long and so well and yet *totally* missed this fundamental defect in her essence?

There was plenty of anger, too. You've just been reading about it. And I suppose that you could regard my challenge to her as some sort of bargaining position. "Pull this off to my satisfaction and I'll still love you."

That meant depression would surely come next.

I was certainly miserable, that late winter and early spring. The loss of my oldest and bestest friend was more than enough to make me miserable. I hated having to think what I thought of her and I hated too that it had taken me so long to see it. She had made a dupe of me.

For a while, the depression diverted into obsession. *How* could I not have seen it? Is she so skilled? Did she drop not one single clue for the whole thirty-plus years of our friendship? This became the point and the pivot of my misery. The same questions, around and around.

It drove me nuts. It kept me awake at night and woke me early. I fixated on tiny incidents and chance phrases from our school days, from our adult lives, trying to decide what they meant. Had they shown the true nature of things? Had I just ignored them?

Eventually, it seemed to me that I would find no peace until I had sifted through the whole mass of our shared experience. I was looking for clues. I wanted to arrange them, rank them and assign all due significance.

So I started to write. I wrote down everything about me and Rhiannon that I could remember and that struck me as interesting. I wrote it roughly in order, I have an orderly soul. I tried hard to be as truthful as one can ever be about anything. What would be the point, at this stage, of trying to deceive myself? It's not easy though.

I soon abandoned my natural tendencies to neatness and completeness. They were not what was needed now. What I needed was the hints and the hunches, the prickles that I'd felt but not understood. Maybe that's where the truth of our shared story was to be found.

It turned into a monster of an essay. Twenty five thousand words, give or take. That's a Masters dissertation. I should know, I've started two. It took a couple of months to do. It should have taken longer, much longer, but I went at it like a mad woman. I would snatch early half hours in the office before anyone else turned up, tap away on the iPad when Robin had taken Ellie swimming.

I finished it by the middle of April. You've just read it. What do you think? Are the signs there? Should I have spotted them or was I taken in by a consummate artist? I give myself a partial let off. The signs are certainly there, now that I come to lay them all out in a row. But they are not so many or so clear. It would have taken a greater seer than an ugly, lonely twelve year old girl to spot them.

*

Alongside all this luxurious emotion, there was a practical issue to be considered. I needed to speak to my husband.

"Robin..*darling?*"

He was amused, at least initially, smiled across at me as we sat together on the sofa.

"Yes..*darling*, what can I do for you?"

This was not going to be all that easy.

"..um..how much money have we got?"

The amusement retreated a bit. He was puzzled, would easily be suspicious.

"What do you mean? You know better than me what's in the current account."

"I know but how much is there in the ISAs?"

His eyebrows shot up.

"What? All of them? Altogether?"

I nodded and Robin did some rapid calculations in his head.

"Forty, fifty grand, I suppose. Why?"

"um, I might need it."

"*Why?*"

Why indeed? I eventually explained, badly I admit, about my promise to Rhiannon - that should she create a work to confound my accusations then I would buy it from her. Robin knew as well as I did how much Rhiannon's great big constructions of bronze or stainless steel could cost.

He was no longer amused. In fact, he expressed rather well his opinion that, perhaps, I'd been a bit rash. In the main, I agreed with him although I still felt the

essential fairness of my promise. We could do it, if necessary, but it would take our life savings. In the meantime, we placated ourselves with the thought that it would probably all come to naught. No point in dwelling upon problems that don't yet exist, would likely never exist.

*

Despite the tricky financial implications, for ages I half-hoped - certainly half-expected - that Rhiannon would turn up on my doorstep with some fabulous new figure to prove me wrong. If there's one thing she responds to, it's a direct challenge. She can work like a demon on occasion. I've seen her do it from time to time. Given the right stimulus, her work rate is extraordinary. She is driven like a soul fleeing damnation. Perhaps that's exactly the point.

Had she turned up, I would have taken her back in a heartbeat. I like to be right as much as the next man (more than most, probably) but I would gladly have been wrong about this, if it meant having Rhiannon back. We may not see each other much these days but the knowledge that she is around somewhere, that I can drink from the font of all that colour and all that life when I need to, was a significant source of pleasure and pride to me. And now it was gone. Worse, I'd deliberately rejected it.

In time, I realised it wasn't going to happen. Either she'd been unable to meet my requirements to her satisfaction (and she is *very* particular, when it comes to her work) or, if she had, she wasn't going to tell me about it.

It was just possible that she hadn't taken up the gauntlet at all. She'd sneered on the barge, said it would be a waste of her talent so maybe she just didn't bother. I doubted that though.

So I settled down and accepted that I could go on without Rhiannon. I accepted that I'd been wrong..no, not wrong, just *partial* about her for all these years. It was a shame but there was no changing it. I would miss her terribly but I had to go on.

How could I be so stupid as to think that was the end of it?

Chapter Twelve

Nate strode along the gangway of the studio barge and out onto the wharf's rough track. Mindy, scurrying a little, caught up with him and laid a hand on the small of his back. He glanced at her with a twitch of his mouth but said nothing, just kept walking.

At first, their way was obvious. There was only one track off the property and back to the road proper. Nate walked as Lot must have walked out of Sodom - straight, fast and without looking back. Eventually, however, they reached a T junction. They were, as far as either of them could see, in the middle of nowhere. These were the back roads of rural north Kent. There was a signpost with arms outstretched but none of the names it bore meant anything to Nate or Mindy.

Nate, eventually, spoke:

“OK. Left is Halstead and Newington. Right is Ham and Wetham. Any ideas?”

“None,” admitted Mindy. “I didn’t notice any of the names on the way here. We came through a small village, didn’t we? Maybe we could get a taxi from there to Chatham.”

Nate nodded. “Left or right?” he asked.

Mindy shrugged. “Left?” she suggested.

Nate nodded again and sank back into his silence. He set off down the left hand road and the two walked steadily for another ten minutes or so. The countryside remained impenetrable; there was nothing to suggest that the village they were aiming for was getting any closer.

They both heard the approaching car at the same instant and stepped into the long grass of the hedgerow to let it pass. But the sleek, black Audi drew up alongside them and the front passenger window travelled smoothly downwards.

“Er, can we give you a lift anywhere?” asked Adrian, a little awkwardly.

“No thanks,” growled Nate. “We’re fine.”

Mindy tugged gently at his shirt.

“Come on, love. We’ve got no idea where we are, have we? Just as far as the village, that’s all.” She smiled at Adrian. “Thank you, that’s very kind.”

She opened the back door of the Audi and got in. Nate, really, had little choice but to follow. Inside, Nick was in the driving seat. As they got in, he turned his head briefly and smiled at them.

“I’m driving back to London. Where can I take you?”

Nate said nothing. Mindy answered, “If you could drop us in the village, that will be fine. Thank you.”

“Which village?” asked Nick. “Halstead or Wetham?” In the rear view mirror, he saw Mindy’s blank expression. “Oh, are you not local?”

“Um, no, not really” explained Mindy. “We came down on the train. If you could drop us at a shop or a pub or something, we’ll call a cab back to the station.”

“Train from where?” pursued Nick.

“Lewisham,” replied Mindy. “We can get a direct train back from Chatham, no problem.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” admonished Nick. “We can do better than that. I’m heading for the Blackwell Tunnel, myself. How about I drop you somewhere near Blackheath?”

Mindy looked at Nate but he hardly seemed to be registering the conversation.

“Um, if you’re sure,” she replied to Nick. “That would be very convenient.”

“No problem at all,” reassured Nick.

“That’s really very kind of you,” Mindy went on.

Again, Nick caught her eye via the rear view mirror. He had one eyebrow raised.

“Hardly,” he remarked. “Under the circumstances, it’s about the least I could possibly do.”

That was as close as anyone got to referring to the events on the barge. Nate remained wrapped in his personal cloak of silence for the duration of the journey. Nick and Adrian chatted inconsequentially, mainly deploring the creeping hipsterfication of North London; Mindy looked at Nate or out of the window in approximately equal parts.

Three quarters of an hour later, Nick drew up in a lay-by close to Blackheath Common and let Nate and Mindy out of the back of the car. Nate at least managed to nod to Nick while Mindy provided rather more articulate gratitude.

It was a beautiful evening, with the sun going down in flames ahead of them as they walked across the common. After a while, Nate sighed and laid his left arm across the top of Mindy’s shoulders. She looked up at him and smiled, sadly.

“I’m sorry, love,” she said. “Really, I’m so, so sorry. You OK?”

“I’ll live,” he said shortly. “It’s my own stupid fault. Serves me right.”

“What on earth do you mean?” asked his wife. “How can it be your fault. You couldn’t possibly have known..”

“Of course I knew,” snapped Nate, cutting across his wife with some heat. “Of course I fucking knew. I knew it the very first time that I met her. She set my teeth on edge right from the very beginning but I ignored it. Stupid, *stupid* twat that I am.”

“Even so,” countered Mindy, “it could have been such a good idea. I still don’t really think that..”

“Yeah,” interrupted Nate again, “but there were plenty of things that should have warned me. But I ignored those too. Vanity, just vanity. That’s all it was. So I got burned. Again. Serve me right.”

The two of them were walking along the A2. As they waited to cross Goffers’ Road, Mindy changed her mind and suddenly swivelled left instead, wrong-footing Nate for a second.

“Where y’going?” he asked.

“Hare and Billet,” she called back to him.

He watched her for a second or two and then ran to catch up.

“Yeah,” was all he said.

*

At the Hare and Billet that Friday night, Nate and Mindy got systematically and thoroughly drunk. The next night, Nate got drunk again; at the Joiners’ Arms this time. Mindy kept him company but didn’t even attempt to match him drink for drink. On Sunday, she was up early, diving back into the books for one last orgy of revision before her *viva* the following day.

Nate slept for most of the morning and eventually rose just before lunch. He sat on the leatherette sofa, green of face and shaking slightly, for the next two hours, saying nothing whilst Mindy tried to make sense of some lecture notes she’d made months ago and only recently unearthed.

That afternoon, they went for a walk on the common. Nate ignored Mindy’s attempts at conversation and strode forward, his chin directed towards his chest. He ignored Mindy and he ignored the stares he attracted from passers-by.

The only person he responded to was an unwary teenager who was stupid enough to shout at him from a safe distance away.

“Oi Spacktard! Where did Hitler keep his armies?!”

Nate immediately swivelled on his heels and headed straight towards the youth. With his fingers balled into fists, his chin jutting forward and brows drawn down over furious eyes, he must have looked like an avenging demon to the teenager who promptly fled.

Mindy laid her hand on Nate’s left arm.

“Hey,” she said, gently.

Nate, still furious, whipped around to face her.

“Hey what?” he challenged.

Mindy shrugged, helplessly. Tears were gathering in her own eyes.

“Nothing. Just hey. Come on, let’s go home.”

Nate looked at her for a few seconds, saying nothing. Then, his colour changed abruptly, he bent suddenly over to one side and heaved his intestinal contents again and again onto the smooth surface of the common. Empty, he crumpled down onto the grass and rested his head on his bent knees.

Mindy sat down beside him and said nothing, just waited. Eventually, he looked up at her, white now rather than green, at least, but with swimming eyes.

“Come on,” she said again, handing him a tissue she had found in her pocket. “Let’s go home.”

They wandered slowly home and there, Nate was finally able to eat a bacon sandwich. He had a raging thirst and worked his way steadily through about three pints of tea. By early evening, his hangover had largely abated. Mindy went back to her books while Nate slumped in front of The Antiques Roadshow. But he was restless now.

“We can’t just sit here,” he said to her, at about eight o’clock. “Let’s go to the Joiners again.”

Mindy looked up from Secrets of the NASM Personal Trainer Exam Study Guide and frowned.

“I can’t love,” she said. “You know I can’t. I just want to spend the evening quietly going over things, make sure I’m really sorted. Besides, I really don’t think I should be drinking the night before my *viva*.” She paused for a second. “Don’t you think you should maybe lay off tonight, as well?” She smiled brightly, “Give that liver of yours a bit of a rest.”

“My liver’s fine,” said Nate, shortly. He tried a wheedling tone. “Ah, come on. Let me have my bad mood for one more night then I’ll be a good boy again tomorrow.”

“Nate, no,” she remained steadfast. “You know I can’t. Tell you what,” she hit upon a compromise, “nip out and get a couple of bottles of Bud. Give us another hour or so and then I’ll have a drink with you before bedtime.”

But Nate was in no mood for compromise. The furious expression returned to his face.

“Fuck you,” he said, grabbing his fleece. “I’ll text Keith. He never lets a mate down.”

He banged the door of the bedsit shut on his way out and thumped down the stairs two at a time.

*

The next morning, Nate awoke to daylight but kept his eyes closed. He felt horrendous. Really awful. His hangover of the previous day was just a mild irritation by comparison. His head was a blinding, deafening, throbbing ball of pain and he had a stabbing sensation in his right ankle that seemed familiar but which he couldn’t identify for the moment. As he lay, trying not to breathe too hard, he realised that the bed felt different. Smaller and firmer than usual. He opened his eyes for a fleeting second and had a brief impression of being in a large, blazingly bright room, with someone sitting beside him.

“Nate.”

A gentle and unspeakably-reassuring voice spoke his name. He turned his head - very, very carefully - towards the sound and opened his eyes again. Mindy was sitting beside him.

“Hello,” she said, smiling at him slightly. “I was beginning to think you’d never wake up.”

“What..?” he began but speaking made the throbbing ball of pain tremble intolerably so he stopped.

“You got drunk, love,” said Mindy in a carefully-neutral tone. “You and Keith got drunk. I don’t know exactly where the two of you went from the Joiners but you fell over and hit your head. In Casualty, you were raging so much that they had to give you an anaesthetic to get a CT scan. That was three o’clock this morning. You’ve been sleeping it off ever since.”

Nate closed his eyes again.

“Shit,” he said. “I’m sorry.” He opened his eyes as a thought occurred to him. “The scan..?”

“..was OK,” replied his wife. “I don’t think they found a brain in there to damage so it was OK.”

Nate managed to nod without dying. Another thought occurred to him. “Keith..?”

“Not quite so bad as you. At least, not yesterday. Karen came to pick him up last night so he’ll be having a very bad day today, I imagine.”

Nate smiled slightly but then winced.

“My ankle hurts. It’s like a stabbing..did I damage..?”

“It’s the drip, love. They put it in your right foot.”

Nate nodded again, a little easier this time. Then he suddenly remembered something.

“Shit, what time is it?” He tried to raise his head but stopped and closed his eyes against rising nausea. “I’m supposed to be at the Bureau at nine. Am I late?”

Mindy smiled grimly. “It’s half past ten, love. Don’t worry, I’ve rung in sick for you. Told them you had an upset tummy over the weekend, you should be back tomorrow.”

Nate grunted his thanks and managed to turn his head a fraction to look at his wife. He had a growing sense of unease that there was something important that she wasn’t saying. Finally, it came to him.

“Mindy, your exam. Have you done it already?”

Mindy just raised an eyebrow at him and shook her head slowly. Nate closed his eyes again and rested his head back on the plump, unyielding pillow.

“Oh fuck,” he said softly to the ceiling. “Oh bollocking, fuckity-fuck. Mindy, I’m so sorry.”

*

Nate’s headache gradually eased over the course of the morning and by early afternoon, he had been declared fit to leave the hospital. He spent the rest of the day in the bedsit feeling woebegone and guilt-ridden.

The next morning, shored up by paracetamol and a bit of codeine, he insisted on going back to work, even if he gave shorter than normal shrift to some of the bewildered who were unlucky enough to pass through the Bureau that day.

One evening, a few days later, Nate and Mindy sat down to dinner together (spaghetti bolognese - Nate’s signature dish) and decided to slack off for a few weeks. Mindy would leave the books alone for a while and maybe they’d even think about taking a holiday.

It was while they were clearing the plates from the table that Nate’s mobile chimed with the sound of a text message arriving. He wandered over to the packing chest and picked up his ‘phone. His brow furrowed as he read the message and then he punched a few keys, put the device back down.

“Who was that, love?” asked Mindy absently, as she filled the sink to wash up.

“Nothing,” was all Nate said but his tone made her glance up quickly.

“Come on, who was it?”

“No-one. I said. No-one.”

Mindy shrugged and dropped the subject. But it happened again - twice - the next evening and again a few days after that, Eventually, Nate had to defer to his wife.

“Mindy,” he asked one evening, as they were sitting together on the sofa, “do you know how to block numbers on this stupid ‘phone?”

Mindy smiled with all the assurance of the superior technocrat.

“It won’t be that difficult.” She held out her hand. “Come on, hand it over. Who do you want block, anyway?”

Nate said nothing and held on to his ‘phone for a moment longer. Mindy looked concerned.

“Come on, Nate,” she said. “Is someone harassing you?” Light dawned in her eyes. “Ohh, is it those texts you’ve been getting all week? Who is it?”

Still Nate said nothing.

“Nate, for fuck’s sake.” Mindy was getting frustrated. “You’re going to have to tell me if you want me to sort the number out.”

Eventually, Nate muttered a name.

“*What?!* That cow, how dare she..?” Mindy, bolt upright, spluttered with indignation. “What could she possibly want? Does she want to come here and humiliate you in your own home this time, perhaps?”

Nate rubbed his chin.

“Mostly she’s trying to explain,” he said. “I try not to read them but it’s hard not to see bits and pieces. She keeps saying that she knows what she did and can we please try again?”

Mindy snorted, actually snorted. Nate was certain he’d never heard her make such a sound before.

“Well, I hope you’ve told her where to go,” she said. “Nate, you’re not seriously considering..?”

“Not a chance in hell,” he reassured her. “No, I’ve told her to fuck off a few times and I’ve ignored a whole bunch but she doesn’t seem to be stopping. If I could just figure out how to block her number, that would do it, I think.”

“Here, hand it over.”

Nate handed the mobile to his wife and watched as, with her mouth a straight line, she jabbed her way around the menus. In less than two minutes, it was done.

“Thanks love,” he smiled. “Now, if I can just work out how to do the same to the email system at work..”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!”

The two of them soon re-settled into their usual routine. Nate’s anger burnt down to a low-level background hum that he could easily live with. His guilt about Mindy and her missed exam was harder to ignore. For a few days, he was actively, boringly repentant and he remained, for the next few weeks, on his best behaviour. He was aware that Mindy, on the whole, found this amusing and wound him around her little finger without compunction. He didn’t mind; he felt, rather, that it was the least he could do.

Her examining board held sittings three times a year; the next opportunity she would have to undergo the *viva* would be sometime in October. The pair of them felt that for the moment, they should simply forget Rhiannon, forget dissertations, forget everything and just enjoy the rest of the summer.

In the second half of August, they went to Jersey for ten days, to a hotel that Nate knew well. From their bed, they could see the scimitar forms of the swifts arcing across the sky. They spent most of their waking hours outside, walking miles along the shoreline, exploring and getting lost, finding pubs and tea shops. In the evenings, they would linger in front of the sunset, with pints of Liberation Blond or Herm Island.

On Sunday 1st September, sun-tanned and more relaxed than either of them had been for some months, they came home. It took them most of the day, one bus, one boat, two trains and finally the Docklands Light Railway to get them door-to-door. They eventually fell into their bedsit at half past eight in the evening. They drank their last bottle of Liberation together in front of the television and went to bed.

*

The next morning, by good fortune, neither of them had to work first thing. Mindy had a class at ten and Nate was doing an afternoon shift at the Bureau so they had a few lazy, hazy hours to ease themselves back into the real world. Mindy, somewhat over-stimulated by the time they got back to Primrose Rise, had passed a restless night. At about four o’clock in the morning, she had finally dropped into a proper sleep.

Nate woke at seven, much as usual. He made himself a cup of coffee and came back to bed with it, wriggling his toes against the covers and idly day-dreaming. Mindy woke just as he was finishing his drink and the next hour or so was spent to their mutual gratification.

At about half past eight, Mindy finally got out of bed, stretched thoroughly and wandered, naked, out of their bedsit and into the bathroom. They were supposed to share the cramped facilities with the other bedsit on this floor but at the moment, as so often, it was empty.

Nate luxuriated in bed for a while longer, listening to the hopelessly erratic spurt of the shower starting up. Mindy stuck her head back round the door of the bedsit and waved his own razor at him.

“Fancy it, love? It’s been a while,” she said with a beguiling smile.

Nate’s own wide smile was answer enough.

“Give us five minutes then while I hop in the shower.”

Nate got out of bed a few minutes later and wandered into the bathroom himself. He left the door half open; the tiny cube got terribly steamed up otherwise. Mindy was just about finished. As she drew back the shower curtain, he handed her the towel and watched appreciatively while she vigorously dried herself off, triggering wave forms in some unexpected places. In the meantime, he started to fill the sink with hot water.

Once she was dry, Mindy started smoothing first the oil and then the razor over his lower and middle face. Nate sighed with contentment. It had been some months since they’d shared this particular intimacy and he had missed it. He reached out both his hands and placed them gently on each side of her ribcage, relishing the contact. She smiled at him with deep pleasure and continued stroking, stroking his face with her fingers and with the razor. It felt like an age since they’d been free of one lurking worry or another. No doubt something else would come along soon enough but for the moment, he was content just to stand in this small bubble of happiness.

Suddenly, from their own room, they heard door buzzer sound. Mindy frowned a little.

“I wonder who that is. Bit early for the postman.”

“Just ignore it, love. Who’s it going to be? Someone’s got the wrong bell, I reckon.”

Mindy smiled again.

“I don’t care who it’s for, I’m busy,” she said as she stretched to her task.

The buzzing recurred, longer this time, accompanied by a insistent hammering on the front door. Before they could do anything, they both heard the click as, elsewhere in the building, someone opened the front door remotely. A woman burst into the building and started to clatter up the stairs. For an instant, Nate and Mindy were frozen with surprise as they looked Rhiannon full in the face and she, in turn, stared back at them.

The moment broke. Mindy squealed, grabbed the bath towel from the rail and darted back into the bedsit. Nate, his anger of two months ago returning with interest, calmly and coldly held a hand towel in front of him and paced down the stairs until he was facing Rhiannon.

“Get out,” he said simply.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she replied, rather absently. “Fair enough and all that but, listen, I’ve got it. I’ve suddenly got it.”

“Get out,” he said again.

“It was the two of you, standing like that. I’ve *got* it,” she repeated with more urgency.

Nate looked at her dispassionately for a moment. She looked different - less vibrant, tired and a bit dishevelled. She also seemed to be looking at something or someone behind him. It was off-putting. Reflexively, he turned his head. There was nothing there.

“Get out,” he said, once more.

Rhiannon ran her fingers through dark, dirty hair in an abstracted fashion.

“OK, I’m going, I’m going.”

She did indeed start retreating down the staircase. Half way down, she called back up to him:

“But hang on, will you? I’ll be back. Two, may be three weeks.” She was actually smiling at him. “I’ve got it, I know how to do it. It’s going to be..stupendous.”

She reached the bottom of the staircase, opened the front door and disappeared. Nate returned to the bedsit to get dressed.

“Silly cow,” grumbled Mindy as she brushed out her long, straight hair. “Still, I’m not going to let her rain on my parade. What she want, anyway?”

“Fuck knows,” replied Nate. “She just kept saying ‘I’ve got it, I’ve got it,’ like she’d gone a bit mental. Oh and she said she’d be back too. In a few weeks.”

“Oh. Great. Is she *actually* nuts?” wondered Mindy, gathering her mane into a pony tail.

“Dunno,” said Nate. “Who cares, anyway? She’s not my problem anymore.”

“Until she turns up again.”

Nate grunted. “Believe me, love, she’s not going to be a problem. I can promise you that.”

Chapter Thirteen

At the beginning of June, a letter dropped through my front door. The address was handwritten on the front in sprawling, angular red cursive. Rhiannon's handwriting is as large and unmistakeable as everything else about her.

It surprised me, I had long given up any expectation of contact from her. I held the unopened letter in my hands for a few minutes, allowing myself the luxury (or was it the precaution?) of a short speculation as to what the envelope might contain.

An apology and acknowledgement that I had been right all along? Not in a million years. Abuse and recrimination? Possible - Rhiannon is not without temper when she feels someone has disregarded her worth - but unlikely. She would generally deem that sort of behaviour as beneath her dignity.

Something else entirely? That was the most likely, I thought. She may make a virtue of confrontation but Rhiannon is as good as the rest of us at overlooking inconvenient truths, when it suits her. The one thing she never confronts is her own thinking.

I opened the envelope and was surprised anew. This was an amiable, even conciliatory letter, explaining that she had been thinking hard about our last discussion (discussion?) and was well on the way to developing a work that she was really, really excited about. It would, she was positive, allay all my misgivings (*misgivings?!).* She was giving Adrian Malakar and a couple of others a viewing of the preliminary maquette on the evening of Friday 21st June and really, really wanted me to be there, too. Could I, would I?

This was the last thing I had expected. My immediate, almost subsuming gut response was "Yes, yes, yes! Oh please, yes!"

I had lost so much when I walked out on Rhiannon that my overpowering instinct was to clutch at any straw to resolve the situation. I loved this woman (despite what I had told her in January) and it was painful to think of her as some sort of Nietzschean monster. If she was able to redeem herself, then I would be the first to applaud her.

But I sat on my hands for a few hours that morning. Over the years, I have learnt, painfully learnt, that my compulsion to keep myself and everyone else happy is not always the best course. I gave myself half the day to let my brain and my gut sort it out between them before forming my reply.

By three o'clock, I had decided that this time, my instinct leaned usefully in the right direction. Rhiannon had offered me an olive branch, albeit one groaning with self-interest. It was more than she might have done and the decent thing for me to do was to accept it. But I had to be wary, of both myself and her.

I sent her an email late that afternoon, expressing a happy interest in the project and promising to do my best to attend. That opened the flood gates and over the next couple of days, we exchanged a dozen or so messages. Her evident pleasure at my reply surprised me. Was it possible that she had been missing me? I never think of her as needing me particularly. Her stated position, always, is that she stands strong and needs no-one.

This new work - Synergy, she was calling it - certainly sounded promising. She told me she'd come across a man at the riding school in Sidcup where Tina works. A man with phocomelia (I could almost see her proudly typing the word) but, who, nonetheless, was able to ride, jump and even untack his beautiful horse.

I was slightly nonplussed. Sometimes I think Rhiannon is a modern day Elijah. Whatever she needs, the ravens immediately bring to her. She would say, of course, that she goes out and gets it. Perhaps she's right.

She was definitely very excited. I pressed for details (phocomelia, I painfully dredged out of my orthopaedic memory, can manifest in any number of different ways) and she inundated me with etymology and anatomy, talked about "abbreviated limbs", "the incomplete carpus", a "focal absence of radius and ulna", as if she'd developed the field of study herself.

I was giddy with delight - but I remembered to check the bank balances.

*

I drove down to Kent again. I'd called in a couple of favours and arranged my working week so that I was free that day. I gave myself plenty of time; there was no need to subject myself to the Seventh Circle of Hell that is the M25 during the Friday evening rush hour.

I arrived just after four o'clock, parked the Punto and walked over to Scheherazade. It was empty so I tried the studio barge instead. It was hard not to relive the last time I had been here; there is no point in denying that I was hellishly nervous. How would Rhiannon and I find each other?

She was in there, shunting things around the room. When I entered, she looked up and smiled widely, came straight over and enveloped me in an enormous hug.

"I'm so glad you're here. I've been listening for you since lunch time at least. You're staying tonight, of course? Come on, you can help me get things set up."

It looked as if she had some sort of small party or soiree planned. We lined up two trestle tables down one side of the room and disguised them with a long piece of red brocade. We fetched wine, mineral water, plates, paper napkins, a selection of glasses from Scheherazade and arranged everything on the tables.

"Mum'll be along later," Rhiannon said. "She's doing me some nibbles. You know, stuff on sticks, yummy little bites, that sort of thing."

"Cheese and pineapple?" I inquired, archly. "That's my absolute favourite." Which, actually, is true.

"Sorry, not this time. Oh, and, by the way," she continued, "don't worry about Mum or John or anyone. I've told them all to behave."

I blinked twice with surprise. It hadn't occurred to me before but, I suppose, as far as John and Rhiannon's mother (and probably all the rest of her family) were concerned, I was currently very definitely *persona non grata*. I hadn't thought of that.

Once the tables were set, we continued clearing an astonishing variety of random kit and materials from the middle of the studio, until a usable space emerged.

"Right," said Rhiannon, almost rubbing her hands, "Now for the main attraction."

She took me to the far end of the studio, to a tall narrow object, draped in old red velvet. It seemed to be a wooden stool with something about a foot high placed on top of it.

"Come on. You grab the other side. We'll move it into the middle. Brace yourself, it's heavy."

I picked up my end of the stool with a rush of effort and whatever was on top wobbled precariously.

"Hey, watch it!" admonished Rhiannon. "Careful, for fuck's sake. It's taken me hours."

"Sorry," I bent my head in contrition and we gently sashayed the stool to the middle of the room. I was starting to get a little excited. "Is it any good? Can I see it?"

"Yes, it is and no, you can't. Not yet," was her stern reply. "As far as I can see," she went on, dispassionately evaluating her own work, "it's one of the best things I've ever done. In that style, anyway. I've done it absolutely straight. Purely representational. No bells, no whistles."

"Ah, go on," I wheedled, twitching the red velvet. "Gi's a look."

"No!" she countered, slapping down my hand. "I'm going to have John do the Big Reveal at a suitable point."

"Who to?" I asked curiously. "How many have you got coming to this shindig?"

"Only a select few. You and me, obviously. John and Arthur; the Jimson will probably show up at some point too. Adrian Malakar." She shot me a lively glance, "you know Adrian, of course. And Nick Wishaw from the hiveMind Trust."

I raised my eyebrows, "That sounds like a big deal?"

She nodded in a so-so sort of way.

"Mm, it might be. He - er - read your review and came to see the show. Emailed me later, out of the blue, to say that if I ever did anything as good but a bit more..well, you know..then he'd be interested in seeing it. I've had

a couple of meetings with him in the last few weeks. He's a big, cocky bastard but he's got a budget the size of St Paul's Cathedral and *carte blanche* to use it."

"Sounds promising."

"Fingers crossed, it really could be. Do you know the hiveMind Trust?"

"Near Euston?"

"That's it. It's a gorgeous old Victorian building, don't you think?, and they're refurbishing the inside. They've got a massive great new atrium planned, Synergy would look stupendous there. Full size, of course."

"Of course," was all I said. I wasn't quite sure how I felt about any of that. I returned to the original subject, "So, seven of us then?"

"Nine in total. The Turners are coming, as well."

"The Turners?"

She grinned at me.

"Yes, the Turners. You know, the man I've been telling you about. Phocomelia, gorgeous horse, all that stuff?"

"Ah, OK. I hadn't picked up on his name. So he's coming with his wife?"

"Yup."

"That's brave," I said, with fervour. I wouldn't have fancied it, had I been him.

Rhiannon looked at me in slight surprise. "You think?" The idea had clearly not occurred to her. "Anyway, I've asked everyone to be here for half-six, seven-ish so we've got plenty of time."

But yes, I thought, very brave.

*

At half-past five, we had just about finished. Rhiannon wandered over to the trestle tables and picked up a bottle of Rioja, waved it cheekily at me. Before she could unscrew the top, her mother, a small and frequently irritable cyclone, whirled into the studio. She pulled us both out to her car, where she handed out two large platters, from the back seat. She made a face at me - hard to tell whether it was cross or comic - but said nothing. Both plates were covered in tin foil.

"That's the vegetarian one," she indicated. "Avocado-mozzarella-and-cherry-tomatoes on sticks plus prawn *vol au vents*. The other one's chicken satay and small, spicy meatballs."

Rhiannon, her hands full, looked a little cross. "I said I wanted smoked salm.."

"I know," said her mother, shortly "but your father got to the fridge at lunchtime and ate it all. So you've got prawns, take it or leave it. Now, I've got to rush."

She looked hard at me again as she brandished her car keys. I suspect she would have stayed on, had I not been present.

"Hmm, OK." Rhiannon kissed her mother on the cheek. "Thanks Mum, give Dad a kick up the bum from me."

Her mother smiled in agreement, got back into her car and whirled away again. Rhiannon and I took the platters back into the studio and laid them, still covered for the moment, on the tables. This time, Rhiannon successfully stormed the bottle of Rioja and she handed me a bountifully-charged glass. Something occurred to me.

"It's quarter to six. Where's Arthur?"

"He's probably next door, doing his homework. Come on, let's go ferret him out. I need to change anyway."

She was dressed in her working uniform of denim and a clay-spattered shirt. I suspected that, true to form, she had only just finished the maquette in time.

"Were you working on Synergy today?"

"No, not today. I got to the stage a couple of days ago when I decided it was as good as it could be. I have to make myself walk away at that point. Otherwise, you just go on fiddling and tweaking for ever and chances are you'll ruin it. It can be heart-breaking."

Clutching our glasses, we wandered back over to Scheherazade. Arthur, in sweat pants and a baggy T-shirt, was at the large table, surrounded by books, pens and other school detritus. His mother grabbed him affectionately around the neck and told him sternly he had to be in some half-decent clothes and into the studio for half past six. He grunted at her and went back to his algebra.

I didn't much feel like sitting with this silent fifteen year old, so I followed Rhiannon into her bedroom. She rapidly shed her denim on to the floor, threw a bright T-shirt dress over her head, ruffled her short, red hair into gorgeous disarray and slicked on some coral lipstick. In a minute and a half, she was finished and fabulous. I could only worship. We went back out to the living space of Scheherazade and settled on the sofas.

"They're coming on the half six train," she told me. "I'm going to pick them up. I think Adrian might turn up before John gets back - do you think you could keep an eye out for him? Get him a drink and some nibbles and charm the knickers off him till either John or I get here."

Charming the knickers off anybody is not really my style but it would certainly be interesting to see Adrian again. I wondered whether we would find it easy to talk to

each other. Or just sooo not. I hadn't spoken to him since he had interrogated me on the telephone about that cataclysmic review. He had been very uneasy about it at the time, but I suspected that with hindsight, he might concede that it had done his precious magazine nothing but good.

At quarter past six, Rhiannon growled at Arthur one more time, donned a pair of black brothel-creepers and left in the Mitsubishi to collect Mr Turner and his wife. I was curious to meet the man and even more curious to see how Rhiannon interacted with him. That, I suspected, would tell me what I really needed to know.

Once she'd gone, I went back over to the studio, removed the tin foil covers from the plates of canapés and tried to make sure that the tables looked as inviting as possible. I also liberally refilled my wine glass. Just as well as I wasn't driving home tonight. I looked around the studio. It was still obviously a working space but now, under Rhiannon's direction, it looked artfully, effortlessly Bohemian. The perfect venue for the intimate but really rather esoteric little gathering she had planned.

I went outside again and leaned back on the gangway rail. This was the longest day of the year and the sun, to my left, was still bright. The shadows were only just starting to think about lengthening. There was a wonderful peace. Not silence, I could hear bird song and the (for once) gentle rustle of the wind through the trees. Blessedly, blessedly peaceful. The view across the estuary was wide and painted in broad strokes, with the sky the dominant feature and the power station on the Isle of Grain forming a useful point of focus.

As I sipped my wine and let the peace steep my bones, a taxi pulled up. From the back of the car, a short, neat man emerged - Adrian. I walked from the gangway to meet him as he approached the two boats. He was as nattily-dressed as before, in a dark charcoal suit and white shirt. The general effect was lifted by a pop of colour from his hot orange socks and matching handkerchief.

It turned out that we were delighted to see each other. We were both smiling broadly as he held out his hands to me.

"Sara, how nice. Destroyed any more reputations recently?"

"It would take a greater force than me to destroy Rhiannon," I remarked.

"Come on, my brief is to charm the knickers off you until she gets back."

We went into the studio where I furnished him with white wine and a choice selection of the canapés. He was drawn to the velvet-covered pedestal in the middle of the space.

"This it?"

"Apparently so."

"You've seen it?"

"Not yet. She's keeping it under wraps until everyone's here. You?"

“No, I wish I had. She’s told me a little about it. Some amazing guy with no arms on a horse, or something. I couldn’t quite pin her down.”

We were standing opposite each other with the pedestal between us. There was no one else here and, it seemed certain, no-one else nearby. My right hand involuntarily reached out and stroked the velvet. I heard Adrian’s sharp intake of breath and our eyes met.

“We could, you know,” he said. “Couldn’t we? Where’s the harm?”

“We could,” I agreed. “But we shouldn’t..should we?”

“No, we shouldn’t.” It was his turn to agree. We exchanged another glance, this time with eyes sparkling. “But we’re going to, aren’t we?”

We put our glasses back down on the table and then walked back to the pedestal.

“Gently. *Really* gently. If we damage it, she will actually kill us.”

We moved in a little and each grasped a hem of the velvet. Slowly, slowly, we started to draw the cloth upwards. I saw the spindle-shaped legs of the stool and then a piece of hard board resting on the seat. On the hard board, I just started to make out a horse’s hoof in clay..

At that moment, the studio door banged open. Adrian and I dropped the velvet as if it were on fire and leapt backwards. It would have been comical to watch. John entered, accompanied by both Arthur and Jimmy. Arthur had changed out of his sweats. Jimmy, as was currently usual, was mainly wearing his beard. John nodded to Adrian.

“Adrian, nice to see you. Thanks for coming. You well?”

Adrian stumbled slightly over his reply but carried it off.

“Good to be here, John. I’m in the pink, thanks. You?”

“Can’t complain, Adrian, can’t complain. Can I get you a drink?”

“No, that’s fine.” He walked over to the trestles and picked up his glass.

“This is mine. Sara was most hospitable with your alcohol.”

“I’m sure.”

John looked at me, his mouth set in a determinedly-neutral position and said nothing. I looked back at him and felt like weeping. I could live without Rhiannon’s mother but I loved John.

My nerves, which had settled, were shimmering anew. Adrian had picked up my glass as well as his and now he handed it back to me. I drained the last mouthful of Rioja and helped myself to another glass, this time of the Sauvignon. It wasn’t really chilled enough but the evening had the potential to turn into a heavy session, I thought. On such occasions, I find white wine to be a safer bet all round.

John marshalled his two boys and, between them, they checked that everything was as it should be. I stayed at Adrian's side. He smiled at me, his co-conspirator.

"Thwarted. Right at the denouement."

"Probably just as well really. Shame to spoil the surprise."

Those words would return to me again and again in the coming months.

The door to the studio banged open once more and Rhiannon appeared, shepherding in two people. One was a short woman in jeans, a hoodie and trainers - proper trainers, none of your Air Max nonsense. These were Asics. Her long, pale blond hair was pulled straight back into a no-fuss ponytail. The other - who could only be Rhiannon's model - was a tall man in chinos and a short-sleeved polo shirt. The pair of them looked as if they'd come straight from work.

She introduced them to everyone, adding some fulsome detail about the immense privilege she'd had, to work with him over the last few months. I realised, as she spoke, that she was a little nervous. I always forget, she is so self-assured. I always forget that she can get nervous too.

Rhiannon made sure her new guests had something to drink - I think she sent Jimmy for a couple of beers - and then pulled me across to meet them.

I had a good look at this Mr Turner - Nate, that's his name - and saw immediately that, in many ways, he was right up Rhiannon's street. A good height, lean but not skinny. It was hard to say whether or not he was well built. We get so used to judging men by their shoulders and arms. Close-cropped, dark-but-greying hair and strong, almost heavy, features. Nice-looking actually, although, personally, I prefer my men more finely drawn.

His hands were visible at the end of his sleeves so he wasn't completely amelic. Reasonable fingers but no thumbs, I think. Logistically, he must have been about fifty, would have to be. That looked about right, although he seemed to be wearing extremely well.

His wife, who was obviously some years younger, introduced herself as Mindy. She was delightfully easy to talk to and it turned out she was a qualified physiotherapist, now turned personal trainer. The lunacies of Agenda for Change had driven her out of the NHS.

I was impressed with the composure of these two people, with their nonchalance at turning up to this small gathering of complete strangers without any apparent need for preamble or display. But then, I noticed the look in Nate's eyes and saw that Mindy was gulping her way down her Sauvignon even faster than I was.

At this point, the last member of this little party arrived. Nick Wishaw did indeed look like the Big Deal that Rhiannon had hinted he might be. She was certainly very pleased to have him here, whatever she may have felt about him personally.

He seemed to me to make a point of resisting her compulsive hospitality. Once Rhiannon had supplied him with a glass of water and the two of them moved into the middle of the room, the atmosphere pointedly changed. Chatter died away and it was clear that the moment was come upon us.

Rhiannon took centre stage and looked at her husband.

"John."

John stepped up to the stool and grasped the red velvet. Rhiannon continued:

"Everyone, thank you so much for coming. I would like to present the maquette that will be the template for what I'm confident will develop into a stunning, life-size work. This..is Synergy."

She nodded to John, who pulled the cloth up and away with a thoroughly-rehearsed flourish. We drew nearer, all eager to see how Rhiannon had risen to this challenge. I confess that my heart was actually thumping.

The figure was a meticulous representation, in clay, of Nate riding a horse. The animal was resplendent on its hind legs, taking flight into a jump. Nate was bent low over the animal's neck, urging it on and up.

It was..

It was..

It was..*awful*.

It was beyond awful. It was one of the most excruciating things I have ever had burnt onto my retinas.

And yet, it *was* beautiful. With perfect internal consistency, what Rhiannon had done, she had done beautifully. I walked all the way around it twice to be sure and then I couldn't bear to look at it any more. I fixed my gaze on my boots and shot out occasional furtive glances, trying to work out if everyone else was seeing what I was seeing.

Nick was, I'm sure he was. He was smiling - the callous shit - and looking from Rhiannon to Nate, obviously waiting to see what would happen. John and the boys stood to one side a little. I don't know what they thought of this maquette but I have no doubt they were, by default, on Rhiannon's side. As they should be.

Adrian, well, I wasn't quite sure what Adrian made of it. He looked uncertain enough and apprehensive too. He was the first to speak, in the end.

"Beautiful modelling, Rhiannon," was his ambivalent comment. "As good as anything you've done."

That was true enough. The technique employed was faultless, the accuracy absolute.

I watched my friend for a moment and it was so terribly, terribly clear that she was completely clueless. Then I looked at Nate and Mindy and my heart sank. There was to be no easy way out of this for anyone.

Inevitably, ineluctably, Rhiannon turned to Nate. She looked so innocently eager, like a rabbit wondering if the on-coming car will be its new best friend. I thought my heart might break. There's little point in dwelling on the details. Nate expressed his disgust in a few extremely pertinent and rather well-chosen words and stalked out, his wife going with him. She had been in tears, Rhiannon was in tears and I wasn't a million miles from them myself.

The atmosphere in the studio was tense and expectant. Rhiannon, motionless, looked at the door which had just banged shut. There were tears wet on her cheeks and, it seemed to me, a bottomless sorrow in her eyes. She'd done this heinous thing but I loved her so much and she was so desolate that I couldn't even feel anger. Just boundless, boundless pity. Then she spoke.

"How dare he talk to me - *me!* - like that."

The atmosphere in the room shifted again. No-one had the slightest inclination to answer her. It was Nick, in the end, who cleared his throat. The sound rang around the silent chamber.

"Well, thanks, Rhiannon," he said. "It's been a most interesting half hour but I'd better get back. Do let me know if you make any progress with this."

With that, he put his glass down on the nearest surface and strode out. Adrian, craven poltroon that he is, muttered something about cadging a lift and scampered after him. John took charge of the two boys and they started clearing the bottles and the canapés, still forlornly untouched.

That left me and Rhiannon. She approached me with hands uplifted, drying salt-water leaving snail trails on her face.

"*What?*" she repeated, now with exasperation. "What's wrong with it?"

For answer, I dragged her by the upper arm back to the maquette, until we were looking at the back of the horse.

"Tell me, Rhiannon, what do you see? Describe it for me."

"A horse, of course. With a rider."

"No. Be specific. What do you see?"

She shot me an irritated glance but complied nonetheless.

"OK, the back view of a horse, rearing up onto her hind legs plus the back of a man bent low."

"OK, good." I pulled her round ninety degrees. "Now what do you see?"

"A horse, I told you, a bloody horse. Side on. Rearing up as before."

"What about the rider?"

"His right leg and a bit of his back."

"That all?"

"I can't see the rest, you know that. He's bending down behind her neck."

Thus it went on. I took her all the way around that maquette. Made her say out loud, four times, that wherever you stood, however you looked at it, all you could ever really see was the horse.

Oh sure, if you paid very, very close attention, you might notice that the rider had an issue with his arms but, for two hundred and seventy degrees, he was efficiently screened by the horse's head and neck. Even from the one side - the left - that you looked directly at him, the man's body, bending down, morphed almost indistinguishably against the horse's flesh. In dark bronze, Nate Turner would most certainly disappear. And he had seen that, seen it instantly and completely.

When I was done, Rhiannon stood in silence, staring at the maquette. I felt a tiny mad flicker of excitement. She'd got it. At last, she'd got it.

"How stupid," she said wonderingly, almost to herself. "How could any of you be so stupid? After all I've tried to do for him. How could he *possibly* not see what I've done?"

She hadn't got it. At last, I understood that she never would. Her heart simply wasn't capable.

"What you've done?" I replied to her. "What you've *done?!?*" My voice was rising. "You obliterated him," I told her. "I can hardly believe it." Finally, I was angry. "Not valid, Rhiannon. Not fucking valid."

I took a couple of breaths.

"Well, I guess my money's safe, at least." Sarcasm - the last refuge of the emotional coward.

I bowed my head and rubbed it hard with both hands. Suddenly, I was done with this whole débâcle. It was time to leave.

"Rhiannon, I'm going. Do you think John would give me a lift to the village?"

She looked at me uncomprehendingly. I left the studio without another word and, on reflection, set myself for a steady tramp back to Halstead Village.

Chapter Fourteen

I had a devil of a job getting home that night. As I trudged from Halstead's Wharf back to Halstead Village, I knew well that I certainly shouldn't be driving. The two mile walk to the village sobered me up somewhat but I was undoubtedly still over the limit.

Train? Possible but then I would only have to come all the way back and collect the car. Staying somewhere looked to be the only option. I could have gone to my mother's, I suppose, but she didn't know I was here and I simply couldn't face the explanations that would be required.

I parked myself in the village pub and ordered some dinner while I had a think. I'm not one of those lucky people who lose their appetite at the slightest perturbation. I wish.

In the end, I sat in that pleasant little pub until closing time, nursing sparkling water after sparkling water. At eleven, I trudged back to Halstead's Wharf. The midsummer dark is never that dark and I was thankful for that. I got back into my car and drove home. Carefully. I'm not proud of it. I crawled back into bed beside Robin at half past three in the morning and he had the good grace to let me sleep in. He'd already planned to be on child-minding duties anyway.

Over the course of that Saturday afternoon, I tried to give him some idea of what had happened. It was surprisingly difficult to get across how apocalyptic the whole thing had felt at the time. He did at least understand that something catastrophic had happened, at least between me and Rhiannon, even if the rest of the world would remain largely untroubled by it.

And that, I thought, would be that. This time, surely, we'd well and truly blown it all to smithereens between us. I couldn't conceive of any possible circumstance under which I'd seek her out. Nor, indeed, she me.

I was wrong again, of course I was. It wasn't just about us two, after all.

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It took a little time. For a good few weeks, I immersed myself in my blissfully normal life. It was a busy time of year for us. Are any times of the year that are not? My girl's summer term was coming to a close. There were sports days to attend, holidays to plan.

In the middle of August, I had an email from John. This was unprecedented.

He was worried about Rhiannon, her behaviour was becoming erratic and increasingly extreme. It was disrupting all their lives. Twice he'd had to leave or cut short meetings to extricate her - once from the hard shoulder of the M20 and once from the checkout at M&S. She was spending all her time at home combing through medical websites, searching for photographs and explanations. Nothing was getting done. What was I going to do about it?

Good question. I mailed back expressing concern and sympathy but also bafflement. If there was something I could do, I would gladly do it, but what did he suggest?

Rhiannon was not going to listen to me. Telling her that she didn't have to complete the task I had set her was never going to work.

His reply was curt:

This clusterfuck is your fault. Sort it out.

As it happened, our summer holiday started a couple of days later. Me, Robin and Ellie were spending ten days down in Dorset and then diverting across to Kent for the final weekend to see a few parents and friends and go to a party on the Saturday night. I dashed off an email to John the day before we left, explaining our itinerary and promising to come and talk to Rhiannon while we were in Kent. I was convinced it would make no difference, I didn't really want to see her at all but, at least, if I'd tried, then I'd tried.

We had a lovely ten days in Dorset followed by a pig of a drive from Bournemouth along to Kent on the final Friday. It seemed to take forever. During that drive, I niggled and niggled within myself about the best time to go to Halstead's Wharf.

Really, I should just go straight over, get it done, but I couldn't face that prospect, not on top of my mother and my in-laws as well. Not all in one afternoon. Sunday was no good. Chances are I'd be hungover, and anyway, we would be starting back up to Derbyshire by about lunchtime. Saturday morning seemed the best option. Or, at any rate, the least worst.

I should have sent her a text, I suppose, telling her I was coming.

On Saturday morning - the very last day of August - I left Rob and Ellie with his parents and drove the Freeland to Halstead's Wharf. The place appeared deserted. With some nonsensical feeling of destiny, I tried the studio barge first. It seemed as if all my disastrous encounters with Rhiannon were fated to play out on that barge. She wasn't there.

My heart lifted slightly. Maybe she wasn't in at all. I forced myself over the gangway of Scheherazade, went into the wheel house and peered down the hatch into their living space.

To my surprise, the place was spotless. Absolutely pin-clean. None of the family is tidy and they are all enthusiastic amassers of stuff. Without regular management, the entropy of their living environment can - and frequently does - spiral upwards out of sight. From the tone of John's email, I had supposed that Rhiannon had abandoned even her usual lackadaisical attitude to household maintenance. Not so, it would seem.

From my vantage point, I could see two heavily-shod feet, hooked between the rungs of a stool. I turned around to go backwards down the short but vertical set of steps that lead from the wheel house and into the hull of the boat.

“..fuck do you want?” retorted a harsh voice behind me.

I reached the bottom of the steps and turned around. Rhiannon was sitting in front of the computer on the large French credenza-thing they had along one wall of the

barge. She had turned her head to watch me descend. If it was she who had been maintaining the barge in such a spotless condition (which I definitely doubted) then she certainly had not been extending the same attention to herself.

I had never seen her look quite so..quite so unaware of her own person. Her hair had grown a bit since I'd last seen her a couple of months' ago. The bright red colour had faded and grown out, she had a deep margin of darker roots showing. This thick, naturally bushy hair appeared completely unbrushed and stood out from her head in a tangle reminiscent of an autumn bonfire. She was devoid of make up but then, so was I. That's not unusual with either of us although I do have friends for whom a lack of mascara is a reliable signal of distress. She was wearing old, baggy jeans and an equally old, baggy shirt.

None of this is particularly note-worthy. She spends a lot of her time in such comfortable, practical, disregardable clothes. What impressed me was the disconnected look on her face. She didn't look crazy, not especially. She just looked as if she had no idea who I was. She looked at me as if I'd happened to wander in from Porlock.

"Hello."

"What are you doing here?"

So she recognised me, at least.

"We're in Kent for the weekend. I thought I'd drop in."

She thought about that for a moment or two.

"Why?"

"Why not?"

She sneered at that, visibly, and turned back to her computer screen. She had a mass of images open; photograph laid on photograph laid on photograph. It made for a nightmarish collage.

These were images of deformity, of absences and injuries (all healed, there was no blood), images of honed limbs and muscular torsos, sportsmen stripped to the waist, images of classical statues and anatomical drawings. There may even have been a pornographic picture or two, I'm not sure. I didn't look too closely, the whole effect was rather unpleasantly Dantean. She was clicking around the screen quickly and without apparent thought - moving images, closing some, opening new ones.

"What you doing?"

"What's it to you?"

I sighed. The temptation to try and reason with her was very strong even though I could see it would be completely pointless.

"But what *are* you doing?"

She shot me a surly glance.

“Trying to find it. Obviously.”

“Trying to find what?”

She only tutted at me in reply. The implication was clear enough.

I was silent for a few minutes, trying not to watch as she turned this corporeal kaleidoscope over and over. I had been right when I told John that there was nothing I could do. Really, I should just go. I wasn't helping her or anyone else.

But this I knew to be cowardice. I knew that what I really, really wanted was simply to leave this whole thing alone and pretend I hadn't seen it. But John had also been right, up to a point. This *was* my clusterfuck, I should make at least some attempt to unfuck it.

I tried to keep it very calm, very normal.

“You don't have to keep doing this, you know.”

She immediately turned her head to stare at me.

“What?” Very brusque, *very* suspicious.

“This.” I gestured vaguely at the screen. “You don't have to keep trying to make this one particular one. Maybe it's just not what you do.”

She instantly erupted. I know she has a temper but that's the only time I've ever actually seen it in action.

“Get out! Get *out!!*”

She was scary, no doubt about it. The wrath of the utterly righteous. I backed away a little.

“Rhi, I just wanted..”

“GET OUT! *GET OUT!!! GET OFF MY FUCKING BOAT!!!*”

“*Rhi..*”

She got off her stool and came forward, right hand raised. She went to slap me but pulled her hand at the last minute in some heroic effort of restraint. One of her ragged fingernails just caught my left cheek.

“*GET OUT!!*”

I said nothing more but turned around and went back up through the hatch as calmly as I could. I stumbled once on the steps. On the gangway, I met John, coming in.

“Sara.” I saw his glance flick to my cheek.

“I tried, John.”

He looked at me again, looked at the scratch and the tears, and then just nodded, went on into the boat. I got back into the car and inspected my face in the rear view mirror. My cheek was stinging a little but it was nothing really. A small scratch, a tiny ooze of blood. Nothing really. I held tight onto the steering wheel for a few moments.

After a couple of minutes, I switched the engine on and drove back to my in-laws. I threw myself into the rest of that weekend with determined sociability and I thoroughly enjoyed the party. But yes, I did earn myself a hangover.

The funny thing is, I saw Rhiannon again the very next day. We were driving up the A2, homeward bound, and they were coming the other way in the Mitsubishi. She was driving, with John in the passenger seat. The two of them were spruced up and laughing together, for all the world as if they were off to a nice Sunday lunch with friends.

*

A few days after our return from Kent, I sent another email to John. I expressed my regret that I hadn't been able to achieve anything constructive, concern for all their well-being and an earnest request that if I could ameliorate the situation in any way, then to let me know. I knew, when I sent it, that it was an empty gesture. It was supposed only to make me feel better. It didn't.

John replied to my email, almost immediately, with a short and somewhat guarded missive of his own. I tried to read between the few lines. He seemed to have realised that my coming to see Rhiannon had perhaps not been the cleverest idea we'd ever had between us.

But it was the second paragraph that really grabbed my attention:

Anyway, I thought I'd let you know that Rhiannon's sorted it, she's turned herself around. We're OK, no thanks to you. You don't have to bother about us, just stay away.

This was, in one sense, a relief. Whether John was telling the truth or no, he'd made it abundantly clear that he no longer expected me to be involved. I should face front and move on.

But I couldn't.

This was a bad time for me. When I demolished my relationship with Rhiannon, I kicked out one of the keystones of my being. I have precious few, not really any to spare. I was angry with her and - I still thought - rightfully so. My conviction had not shifted, despite the turmoil.

I didn't mind the anger. It was, in fact, easier all round when I could hold on to it and remember that I was right. But it wasn't always easy. Kicking out that keystone left

me with an odd and terrifying sensation that I was soluble. Destroying my relationship with Rhiannon seemed also to have destroyed the structure within which I existed. That left me floundering and frightened.

For the first time in my life, I became unwilling to live in my own head. That's always been my retreat, my safe place. Now I shunned it, doing anything to muffle the gibbering sound of my fear. For the first time, I understood those who are driven to be doing, doing all the time, lest they have to stop and take notice of the sounds - or indeed the silence - of their own soul.

The worst times were when I remembered the other people who had got caught in this horrible net. Not John, not so much. In many ways, he was as complicit in all this as I. But the two boys, the Turners - this was none of their doing. The memory of that nice couple spread like an indelible stain on my conscience. I kept asking myself, suppose we had removed the red velvet - Adrian and me? Suppose we had known in time, could we somehow have aborted the awful sequelae?

I found myself increasingly wondering what John had meant. How had Rhiannon "sorted it"? Had she found what she'd been looking for in that computer of hers?

On a day by day basis, I did OK. You have to, when you have a small child and a job. You can't just opt out. To all intents and purposes, I was functioning without a problem. I was eating too much and drinking too much. Not enough to cause trouble (well, no more trouble than a tighter pair of trousers will give you) but still. If anyone had written it all down and totted it all up, they would probably have sucked their teeth a bit.

I wasn't talking enough but that's one of my factory settings. I was also developing a bad habit.

"What you doing?" asked Robin one evening as I guiltily shut the iPad on his approach.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," I said, as casually as I could muster, "just browsing."

"Anyone would think you were looking at porn," he joked as he handed me a glass of wine.

But it wasn't porn I was after. I'd amassed a short roster of websites that I checked a dozen times a day, often more. If Rhiannon had indeed "sorted it" then that could only mean one thing, as far as I could see. She must be about to embark on a new work. That was what I was looking for.

I know, I know. I should have left it alone, I know. Not cared, gone forward. *This was not my fault.* But I couldn't. I so badly wanted to see what she was going to do. Which way would she go? Would she vindicate my accusations or my faith? Anyway, it made no difference. I found nothing. I wouldn't, I suppose. Whatever she was planning on doing, it would surely take time.

As Autumn deepened into Winter, I settled down reasonably well. Still eating too much and knocking it back rather too heavily, still a bit obsessive with those internet

searches. But I levelled it off a bit. I managed to bury that stain on my conscience deeply enough that I could smell it only in the small hours of the morning.

Chapter Fifteen

Nate waited. He honed his anger and he waited. He kept it sharp and bright and ready. It was available for use at a moment's notice. He walked around for days, feeling as if he had high resolution lenses in his eyes. He had a strange sense that his vision was actually enhanced, as if he could see things in pin point detail.

He waited for two weeks, then for three weeks. When he had waited for six weeks, he decided that the threat was null. Whatever the mad cow had been on about, whatever vision she thought she'd seen in their tiny bathroom, she either couldn't or wouldn't act on it.

He relaxed a bit. Not all the way - the only place he ever completely relaxed was inside Armoury Court - but he stood himself down, almost back to his routine level of alertness. And he tried - hard - to forget about Rhiannon and Synergy and the exhilarating feeling he'd had when a crowd of people applauded him as he jumped off a horse.

In many ways, these were good days for him and Mindy. Life was moving forward in a generally satisfactory fashion. Nate decided it was high time he did another proper race. After some internet research, he decided to enter the Royal Parks half marathon. That gave him a clear three months to train and, with Mindy's help, he devised a training schedule with the aim of beating his previous personal best - ten minutes or so under two hours.

At the beginning of October, Mindy went to Middlesex, underwent the *viva* and, shortly afterwards, had confirmation of her Masters level qualification. She'd expressed an instant of disappointment at her "merit" grade but, there, the thing was done and in the bag. It was hers to keep.

Now, she could pitch herself at a higher level. She was also in a position to charge more for her time which sounded good to both her and Nate but that wasn't really her principle motive. She was starting to move away from personal fitness instruction and back towards her real vocation of therapist.

Right from the start, when she'd signed up to her Masters course, Mindy had had the diabetics and pre-diabetics in her sights. She relished the idea that she could help them with the roller coaster that is blood sugar control. She loved the fact that a well-designed diet and exercise regime would not only help them lose weight but could actually improve their condition, sometimes to the point where they didn't need their tablets any more.

It didn't happen immediately, of course. Initially, she found that she was most often preaching to the already converted. People training for marathons and triathlons would come to her to fine-tune their training schedules, their pre- and post-race meal plans. This was fine but Nate knew that it wasn't really what she had in mind.

"I mean, let's face it," she moaned at him one evening, "the marathon runners don't really need me, do they? They're already so well motivated. Even without me, they'd just go off and find out what they need from someone else - or the internet."

“And you do love to be needed, don’t you?” smiled Nate down at her, reaching forward a little to stroke her blond hair. “So how can you get to the people who really do need you?”

Mindy chewed her lip for a moment or two, thinking. Then she sat up.

“Where’s the ‘phone book?”

*

She spent much of the next few days on the telephone to GPs and practice nurses in the Lewisham and Catford area. Over the next couple of weeks, she devised a short and - she hoped - accessible introductory talk about the way that a supported nutrition and exercise programme could help stabilise blood sugar. She emailed the powerpoint file to all those who’d been interested. She printed out posters and flyers and charmed clinic receptionists into displaying them. She set dates for her first three events.

The first was at Rushey Green Medical Centre, towards the end of October. Mindy had planned a session for twenty or so of the practice’s diabetic patients. She would talk for half an hour or so and then field questions and guide any discussion that resulted.

She was nervous, this was some way outside her comfort zone. But, as usual, she had prepared thoroughly. Indeed, her talk was word-perfect, Nate had heard it at least eight times.

Just after six o’clock, she was standing in front of the mirror, applying mascara and lipstick - not too much - before sorting out her hair. From his seat on the sofa, Nate recognised the tell-tale, rhythmic over-brushing that was going on.

“Want me to come with you?” he suggested.

She looked at him in the mirror. They both knew that this was a generous offer on his part and she appreciated it.

“Would you?” she asked with evident relief. “Just this first time? I’m sure it will get easier as I do it more often.”

“Course. No worries, love. I’ll just sit at the back and say nothing.”

“You can prompt me when I dry up,” Mindy teased him brightly. “You know the talk at least as well as I do.”

“You should give me a question.”

“What d’you mean?” she turned to him, her brow furrowed.

“You know, sort of prime me with a question to ask. That way, I can get the ball rolling when everyone’s stunned into silence by your brilliance.”

“S'not a bad idea,” conceded Mindy, grudgingly. She finished the French plait that she'd woven into her hair and secured it with a band. “Come on,” she continued, with a burst of energy. “I want to be early, make sure there're enough chairs and stuff.”

Mindy grabbed her coat and Nate donned his fleece. It was a blustery, showery October evening, which showed no sign of clearing up. As they progressed down Lewisham High Street, Nate suddenly looked over one shoulder.

“What?” asked Mindy.

“Nothing,” replied Nate. “Thought I heard someone call but I can't see anyone.”

They walked a little further. Nate stopped, looked back again.

“D'you hear it that time?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

The two of them turned around and looked back up the High Street. In the rainy gloom, deepened by the dazzling points of the street lights, it was hard to be sure of anything. After a moment or two, however, they made out a person coming towards them. Whoever it was appeared to be labouring a little with something heavy. Under each point of electric light, that something glinted for an instant.

“Hey!” There was no mistaking it this time.

The person drew nearer.

“Jesus! Rhiannon.” Nate's voice rose in exasperation. His anger, on the back burner for the last couple of weeks, came promptly to the fore, raring to go.

“Hear me out, will you? Just hear me out.”

There was a note, almost beseeching, in her voice that he'd never heard before and she looked extraordinary. She had the same neglected, dishevelled appearance that he had noticed previously but this time, she had thrown some make up, badly, on top of it all. She was wearing a large man's mackintosh over denim and heavy boots and she carried in front of her, like a shield, something that seemed to be constructed of strips of steel.

“Rhiannon, if you don't leave us the fuck alone, I'll have the police on you for harassment.”

Her beseeching tone turned strident.

“Just let me show you..”

“I'm warning you, Rhiannon, I can make this very, *very* embarrassing for you.”

She was not to be deterred, she was practically shouting now. "I told you, just *look..*"

Nate had had enough.

"Fine," he said, sharply. "Don't say I didn't warn you." He started shouting himself, "Help! *Help!!*"

At half past six on this working day, Lewisham High Street was still busy with people hurrying home or out to grab some shopping. Several people quickened their steps to get past the odd group of three.

"*Help!* Somebody, please, help!"

One woman stopped, a look of concern on her face.

"What's up?" she asked. "You all right, love?"

"This woman's harassing me," Nate cringed slightly before Rhiannon. "She just stopped me in the street and started abusing me. She won't leave me alone."

The woman turned to Rhiannon, a look of disgust on her face.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," she admonished her, scathingly. "Get out of here before I report you to the authorities."

"But.."

"I mean it. Go!"

Rhiannon looked wildly from the woman to Nate to Mindy. Without another word, she turned and stomped back up Lewisham High Street. The woman smiled at Nate.

"You OK, dear?" she asked.

Nate effected a degree of relief. "Yes, I'm fine. Thank you so much. I didn't really know what to do, she looked a bit unhinged."

"Drunk, probably," said the woman briskly. "Well, if you're sure you're OK, I'll get on."

"Yes, yes, of course. Thank you again, ever so much."

The woman resumed her progress along the High Street. Nate and Mindy waited a moment or two to let her get a decent distance away and then started walking on themselves. For a short while, they were silent. Then Mindy giggled.

"You are dreadful," was all she said, as she punched her husband lightly on his left arm.

*

After a slightly shaky start, Mindy's talk went well. The discussion afterwards was brisk and animated and the session ran - gratifyingly - half an hour over time. She gave out a dozen contact slips.

Eventually, Nate and Mindy were allowed to get away. It would be past nine o'clock by the time they got back. The wind and rain had taken firmer hold and they hurried up Rushey Green and onto Lewisham High Street, keen to get back inside Armoury Court before they were wet through.

By the time they turned onto Primrose Rise, they were striding with their heads down, pushing into the wind. As they approached Armoury Court, Nate raised his head to look along the street.

"I don't believe it," he muttered.

"What?" asked Mindy, behind him, staring doggedly down at the rain-battered pavement.

"I don't fucking believe it. She's still there."

They reached the house. Rhiannon was sitting on the doorstep with her knees drawn up. Her hair was rat-tailed and dripping down her neck. She had trails of mascara running onto her cheeks, her mac sodden and flattened from the rain. Between her knees, on the pavement and glinting in the street lights, was the stainless steel figure, about eighteen inches high.

"Look," was all she said.

Nate and Mindy stood over her in silence.

"Look."

Nate reached over her head to unlock the front door.

"Come on," he said grimly. He stepped around her to go into the house.

*

Inside, the bedsit was warm enough; everyone started to steam gently. Mindy took off her own coat and relieved Nate of his fleece. She put them both on a radiator. Nate filled the kettle, threw teabags into two mugs. Rhiannon stood, alone and dripping, in the middle of the room. With her soaked, shapeless Mackintosh and streaking make-up, she looked like a clown without a circus. She placed the stainless steel figure on the table.

"Look at it," she said again.

"When we're ready," growled Nate, in reply.

In a few minutes, Nate and Mindy were cradling warm mugs. Together they looked at the shining figure on the table.

“What do you think?” Rhiannon’s voice shivered a little.

The other two didn’t answer. They were still looking at the figure. Rhiannon tried again.

“I mean, it’s better, isn’t it?” Her tone was a little steadier now, almost conciliatory. “It’s better than Syn..better than the other one.”

Mindy ignited at this.

“Of course it’s better than the other one,” she snapped at the other woman. “It could hardly be any worse.”

“Mindy,” admonished Nate gently, “It’s OK.”

But Rhiannon was holding her hands up.

“I know, I know,” she admitted. “Sara showed it to me.”

“What d’you mean?” asked Nate, warily.

“She explained it. Took me all the way around the maquette and had me..and pointed it all out. I didn’t get it before..”

Mindy snorted loudly.

“..but I do now,” continued the other woman. “Seeing the two of you, so close, so beautiful, in your bathroom together. Now I get it, I *really* get it.”

There was silence for a minute or two. All that could be heard was the sound of the central heating, ticking irregularly. Nate and Mindy looked yet again at the figure on the table. Rhiannon warmed to her theme.

“It’s good, isn’t it? I *know* it’s good. I can feel it like I’ve never felt anything in my life.”

The other two still said nothing.

“Imagine it bigger,” she went on, her voice compelling. “Imagine it life-sized, *bigger* than life-sized, in the hall of a public building that gets three hundred thousand visitors a year. *Imagine that.*”

“What d’you mean?” said Nate again, sharply.

“Oh, don’t worry, I haven’t shown it to *anyone* else yet. I’m not completely stupid. But I did contact Nick again. Let him know what I had in mind. He was very positive about it. Although,” she added, a smile coming to her smeared face for the first time. The effect was grotesque. “he did say that if you went for it, he’d eat his own socks.”

Nate regarded her impassively for a couple of seconds.

"His socks are safe."

"Oh!" Rhiannon was crestfallen. "Can't you..can you not forgive me?"

"I can't," interjected Mindy, with heat.

"It's not an question of forgiveness," said Nate, calmly. "It's trust, Rhiannon. I just don't trust you. How can I?"

"No," she replied. "I suppose not."

She ran her fingers through her saturated hair, slicking it back, stopping it dripping over her face and neck. She pulled a blanket from her bag and started to wind it around the figure.

"Thing is," she mused as she wrapped. Her voice was cracking, despite her best efforts. "I don't know where else to go. If you won't help me, who will?"

She lifted the wrapped figure into the large bag, heaved the bag onto her shoulder and started for the door.

"Why on earth would I want to help you?" asked Nate, incredulous rather than angry at this new appeal.

"Look, I *want* to understand, believe me. I *want* to do it better. If someone like you won't help someone like me, then..well, where..?"

She had her hand on the door handle now, pulled open the door.

"Wait," said Nate, his eyes shut.

Rhiannon turned to look at him.

"You've *got* to be kidding me," said Mindy.

*

It wasn't easy. Mindy was *not* happy about it and in no mood to be easily appeased.

"I can't believe you're even considering the idea," she remarked to Nate in disbelief, later that evening after Rhiannon had gone.

"I know, I know," he tried to reassure her, "but she's right, she's bloody right, this time. I hate to admit it but she is."

Mindy merely curled her lip.

"Mindy, if I *don't* do this, then I lose all right to moan. How can I expect the world to change around me when I won't help even one person make the shift?"

The lip didn't straighten.

"I don't see that it follows, Nate," she countered. "Why do you have to put yourself through that horrendous experience - *again* - on the faint chance that she might just improve her attitude?"

"But she won't do it again," he said calmly. "She can't."

"Sorry, you've lost me. She can't what?"

"Can't hurt me again. I'm forewarned now. That's my default position - that she won't be able to change. I'm expecting her to fuck it up, really *quite* badly." He paused for a moment. "Where there's no hope, there's no disappointment."

Mindy looked a little bewildered.

"I still think you're nuts. If you want to do this, you can do it without me."

Nate got a little exasperated.

"Of course I can't do it without you, you silly bint," he chided her. "You've seen the model. It needs both of us."

Mindy was not convinced.

"Hmmpf. She could stick any old female figure in, doesn't have to be me."

"But I don't want any old female figure," said Nate softly. "I want you, love. Holding me. In steel. Forever."

Mindy looked up at her husband, delight and tears mingling in her eyes. Still, she doubted.

"Are you *sure*?" She asked him, one last time.

"Yes," he replied, with emphasis. Then he grinned, "Well, kinda, nearly."

She shook her head in reluctant acquiescence.

"Well, if you're sure, love. But still, it seems like fool-me-once, to me."

He laughed at that.

"I know. I'm a fool."

*

They got started.

Suddenly, there was some urgency. Rhiannon showed the model to Nick Wishaw and he had immediately started wheedling. The hiveMind Trust planned to unveil their newly-refurbished headquarters just before Christmas. If the sculpture could just be ready by then, was there any chance..?

Rhiannon had them both promptly down to Halstead's Wharf for a photo session. The sculpture would have both figures unclothed but she left the pair of them their underwear. Nate was not really bothered, she'd seen the best and the worst of him already. Mindy, similarly, had no particular hang ups about displaying her body.

The pose was not particularly onerous, although Rhiannon repeatedly bent them into slightly more exaggerated curves than were actually natural. She circled around them, taking shot after shot after shot. Her hair, newly razor-cropped, was platinum-blond.

Whilst she was being photographed, Mindy looked curiously around the studio, at the models and the pictures and the junk. She'd taken in very little of it, the only time she had been there previously.

"You really love your athletes, don't you?" she remarked to Rhiannon.

After some initial suspicion on both sides, the two women appeared to have settled to a mutual, if not terribly comfortable, truce. Rhiannon agreed with her.

"I really do," she conceded, ignoring the slight edge that Mindy's voice had contained. "Give me a rugby player any day of the week but it doesn't matter too much, does it?, really, just as long as you keep yourself fit and strong. So many people don't, but it's such an important part of life, don't you think?"

"Well, obviously, I do," said Mindy. "It's not just the physical aspect, either. I'm convinced exercise is good for your mental health too. That's certainly my own experience and there are loads of studies that say the same thing."

"Doesn't surprise me," said Rhiannon, thoughtfully. "I've always believed in the value of exercise. I could have swum for Kent when I was younger. I'm sure it enhances creativity too."

Nate joined in the conversation.

"So what do you do, these days?"

"What d'you mean?" asked Rhiannon, from behind her camera.

"Well," said Nate, wickedly, "I know you don't ride those two horses you've got out there, so how do you keep yourself fit and strong? Do you still swim?"

"Only at Center Parcs, these days," admitted Rhiannon. "I do.." She made an all-encompassing gesture with her arms, taking in the entire studio. "I do..this."

Mindy was puzzled.

"This? What's this?"

"*This.*" Rhiannon made the sweeping gesture again. "My work. It's incredibly physical."

She was visibly nettled when the other two burst out laughing.

"Hey, it really is. You've got no idea."

Mindy was still unconvinced.

"I can see how it needs strength but fitness? Really? I don't see how."

"I can spend twelve hours on my feet, when I'm really going for it," Rhiannon defended herself. She deflected the conversation back to Nate. "How about you? I mean, I know you ride," she blushed, "of course, but is there anything else."

"Running's my regular routine," said Nate. "I've got a half marathon coming up just after Christmas. And I do some weights and abs, most weeks. But Mindy's spin class - that's what I do when I want to step up a level. That class is a killer."

It was Rhiannon's turn to be unconvinced.

"Going nowhere on a static bike?" she asked. "It must be incredibly boring. Hard to see the point."

Nate grunted. "Too bloody knacker to be boring."

Rhiannon still looked unconvinced.

"Come and try, if you don't believe me," Nate provoked her. "I bet you can't get through it."

*

*Welcome to the jungle, we got fun and games.
We got everything you want. Honey, we know the names.*

NINE, I SAID NINE!! COME ON, GUYS, NOT SIX, NINE!!

Nate was sitting on a static bike with Rhiannon on another beside him. Mindy was at the front of the class, directing proceedings. He had not been remotely surprised when Rhiannon had emailed him, shortly after their photo session, suggesting that she come up to Lewisham to experience this class that Nate had spoken so highly of. He did wonder if perhaps he had thrown out the challenge deliberately, just to see whether or not she would bite.

Now she was clad in sweatpants and an old T-shirt, with a bottle of water balanced on the front of the handlebars. He noticed that she sent frequent glances his way. People always did, until they got used to it.

*Cause if you liked it then you should have put a ring on it.
Yeah if you liked it then you should have put a ring on it.
Wuh uh oh uh uh oh oh uh oh uh oh uh oh.*

OK, PUT ONE FULL TURN ON AND STAND UP!!

Mindy's spin class was Nate's party piece, in a way. Unable to use his arms and hands much, he had eventually mastered the art of getting through the whole class relying wholly on his legs and his core. The only thing that defeated him was the knack of sprinting fast when standing. He would use those sections as hill climbs instead, winding up the resistance until his quads screamed for mercy.

When he'd first started the class, the regulars were clearly puzzled. However, after a couple of weeks, they all got thoroughly behind him. In fact, some of the more competitive members had joined in. When Nate was attending regularly (after the embarrassing falling-off-Loveflower incident) Mindy could have four or five people at once going through the whole session trying not to use their arms.

She had grumbled to Nate that she had no idea what to make of this. Did it invalidate her insurance? Did it do her clients actual damage? Luckily, when the craze was at its height, no-one fell out of the saddle. Nate eventually slackened off his attendance and everyone else went back to normal.

*Baby, I don't know why I love you so.
Maybe 'sjust the way that God made me this day.*

COME ON!! PUSH IT THROUGH, JUST THIRTY SECONDS MORE!

When she was running a class, Mindy morphed into a different woman. "Little Hitlerette" Nate called her, it always made him laugh. At least, it would have done, had he been able to spare the breath for laughing. She yelled, cried, exhorted, even insulted those she knew well enough. To a soundtrack of eye-bleedingly loud techno-beats (Nate would far rather have had some good, head-banging rock but apparently, he was out of touch), she dragged her class up steep hills and through long sprints.

Nate found it fairly tough himself on this Tuesday morning. It had been a while and, although he was fit, he was out of practice for this particular class.

He kept one eye on Rhiannon beside him. She had stopped looking in his direction now and was pedalling grimly, getting redder and redder. Her breathing was erratic and the water bottle on the handle bars was already empty but, he couldn't deny it, she was keeping up. She didn't look as if she was enjoying it but then, nobody ever did.

After forty five hard-core minutes, the session started to wind down. The class spent five minutes free-cycling gently and then went through a stretching routine. Rhiannon was still beetroot of face but breathing more easily. Finally, they were allowed off their bikes. Mindy casually undid Nate's pedal straps as she walked past.

“Well, thanks for that,” remarked Rhiannon, still breathing hard, as she towelled her face again. “Great work out, I really enjoyed it. I must come again.”

“Any time,” Nate agreed. “You’d be welcome.”

He walked to the edge of the room to collect his bag. As he went, he heard a groan behind him and then a thump. Rhiannon was slumped on the floor. Mindy crouched beside her, urging her to keep her head between her knees. She looked up.

“Water, Nate, could you get a cup of water from downstairs?”

When he returned with a couple of plastic cups of cold water, Rhiannon was on her back with her arms over her eyes; a large pool of watery vomit on the floor lapped at her T-shirt. Mindy was grinning widely.

*

Once Rhiannon recovered, she had been brusque, managing to smear only a thin veneer of politeness over her anger. Mindy, too, had been all compassion and concern but Nate noticed a gleam in her eyes that he couldn’t quite define, as she escorted Rhiannon to the changing rooms.

After that class, Mindy was far happier about their collaboration with Rhiannon. Nate wondered if she felt that retribution had been paid or penance had been done or something. Perhaps she had been impressed by the determination of the other woman to get through a session that, by all reckoning, she simply should not have been able to complete.

It was a funny thing, but the whole business made Nate feel *more* uneasy somehow. He wasn’t exactly sure why. Something about the way Rhiannon had attacked the class made him uneasy. It had been beyond all rhyme or reason, really.

Anyway, there wasn’t much for the pair of them to do, from here on in. Rhiannon had all the photos and sketches she needed; now it was down to her to get the thing done in time. As far as Nate understood it, the work was progressing. Rhiannon sent them occasional tantalising glimpses - partial snapshots of Nate’s leg or Mindy’s shoulder blade. She was calling it “Lightbulb”. Bit left-field, thought Nate, but he sort of understood why.

*

By the middle of December, it was ready.

On Thursday December 12th, Rhiannon informed them, Lightbulb would be transported by flatbed truck from Halstead’s Wharf to Euston Road.

Can you come? she wrote in her email. Can you both come on the Friday? Before it opens properly and the ravening hordes get in. You must see it, it’s just amazing. I’ll be there all day.

Nate and Mindy needed little in the way of persuasion. They both arranged to finish work at four o'clock that Friday afternoon and made their way to Euston Road. The hiveMind Trust was housed in a large building almost directly opposite the main line station.

They went through the glass double doors, past the reception desk and up a short flight of steps into a vast atrium, gloomy now in the late afternoon twilight. The place was bustling; an army of people was cleaning, arranging, checking. The atrium was double height - the original ceiling must have been removed. There was a large stone plinth right in the middle of the vast space and standing on the plinth, reaching up and up and into the heights, was Lightbulb.

As before, the work had been cleverly lit. Spotlights hit the steel from all directions, highlighting curves and leading the eye on and in, to explore every part of the work.

Nate and Mindy had both been nervous. Little had been said on the tube ride to Euston. Now, they said nothing but walked separately around and around the figures, transfixed by their own image. Eventually, they came together.

"You. Holding me," said Nate, thoughtfully, still gazing at the work.

"In steel," she said, back to him.

"Forever." He finished it.

Then they were silent again and stood, together, just looking. Nate's left arm was laid across his wife's shoulders.

"Hey!" A bright and eager voice punctured their reverie.

Rhiannon emerged from the gloom and into the spotlights. She was stunning. Her short platinum hair haloed in the lighting and she was wearing a rich, fitted black coat.

"Well, what do you think?"

But she was smiling and her eyes were shining. If she was nervous, it didn't show. She knew how good this was.

"Come on, I need a drink. I've been giving orders all day, my mouth feels like a sandbox."

She led the way through the atrium, The cafeteria lay on the other side, past the toilets and the staircase. Rhiannon bought three bottles of cloudy craft beer and they sat down at an empty table on plump, primary-coloured sofas.

"How on earth did you get it in here?" asked Mindy, as she took a pull from her beer. "It's huge!"

Rhiannon grinned at her, appreciatively.

“It was the *most* enormous bother.”

“Yes, I bet,” said Mindy, with feeling.

“Brute strength, basically,” went on Rhiannon. “It’s not too bad on the level, once you’ve got it on a wheeled platform but getting it up and down stairs is a bugger. Me and a number of hefty lads pretty much had to lift it bodily out of the studio.”

“Ropes?” queried Nate.

“Tied to what?” countered Rhiannon. Nate saw immediately that ropes hauling on those perfectly-formed curves of stainless steel was not a good idea.

“It was even worse at this end,” Rhiannon continued. “We had to stop right outside. Held up Euston Road for a good forty minutes yesterday afternoon. In the rush hour. Can you imagine the fuss?”

Mindy looked faintly appalled. Nate knew she was seeing the disruption that must have ensued. Rhiannon’s eyes were sparkling.

There was a short phase while they all drank some beer. Then Rhiannon asked the question again.

“Well, what do you think?”

Maybe she *was* a little nervous. When Nate and Mindy said nothing for a moment or two, she started to get twitchy.

“Ah, come on. You’re surely not going to tell me..?”

“No no no.” Mindy hastened to reassure her. “It’s difficult to put into words, is all. I think I’m..awestruck. It’s so beautiful and so..*weird*, seeing ourselves so huge up there.” She was silent again, briefly. “It’s so beautiful,” she repeated.

“And right?” Rhiannon was still a little anxious.

“Oh yes. Very right.”

The other woman visibly relaxed but before she could respond, Nick Wishaw approached their table. He immediately recognised Nate and Mindy.

“Mr and Mrs Turner, how absolutely lovely to see you.” He hitched up one of his trouser legs to reveal a navy-clad ankle. “I’d better get on and eat these socks, I suppose. Rhiannon,” he went on, “could you spare me ten minutes? We need to finalise arrangements for tomorrow.”

“Yes, of course.” Rhiannon turned to Nate and Mindy, “You don’t mind, do you?”

“No rush, no rush,” Nick told her. “Finish your beer, I’ll be over by the reception desk.”

He walked off.

“What’s happening tomorrow?” asked Nate.

“Preview weekend for Lightbulb starts. It opens officially on Monday. The Arts press all turn up plus any invited guests. Oh and,” Rhiannon added, much as an afterthought, “it’s also the official opening of the refurbished building this weekend. There’s a lot going on, it’s going to be quite glitzy. Come, if you want. I can easily wangle you a couple of invites.”

She drained her beer. “I’d better go and sort Nick out. I’ll be back in a jiff.”

She stood up but before she could walk away, Mindy grabbed her arm.

“Rhiannon, I - er - I don’t quite know..I really, really didn’t think you could do it but..have to say..I think I was wrong. That sculpture..it’s one of the most amazing things I’ve ever seen.”

Rhiannon said nothing, just smiled wonkily and walked off to find Nick. Nate and Mindy were left with their beers.

“You OK, love?” Mindy asked her husband. He just nodded, abstractedly. “What d’you want to do? Hang around or get off?”

“Get off,” Nate answered, decidedly. “I feel like a spare part. We can come back some other time, make sure it hasn’t fallen down.”

“OK, I’ll just nip to the loo.”

Nate sat on his own for a few minutes. Rhiannon wandered back.

“You two all right? Where’s your wife?”

“She’s gone to the ladies. We’re off in a minute.”

“Ah, OK. Look, I’ve got a bit more to do here yet. If you want to come tomorrow, that’s fine. I’ve put your names on the guest list, won’t be a problem.” She went on, smiling, “You might find the press are just as keen to talk to you as to me.”

“Sounds like a good reason to stay away,” he grunted. He thought for a second and then stood up, so the two of them were on a level. “Rhiannon, what Mindy said? I didn’t think you’d do it either. I really didn’t. I’m... gobsmacked. It’s just wonderful.”

He looked straight at her and she looked straight back at him. Blue eyes met green-grey ones. From the corner of his vision, he could see Mindy returning.

“Thank you,” he said, simply, holding out his hands to her.

Chapter Sixteen

At the beginning of December, I chanced upon a small paragraph on the hiveMind website.

Our Director of Operations, Mr Nick Wishaw, has been overseeing the extensive refurbishment of our headquarters on Euston Road. The end result will be a spacious, light environment, better suited to public use. There will be a permanent, free exhibition in the William Harvey Room and a rolling programme of challenging artistic and scientific work on display throughout the building. The stunning new Atrium will become the home of a significant new work by renowned anatomical sculptor, Rhiannon Hughes.

This was it, this was definitely, tantalisingly it. But I still didn't know what "it" was. I spent the morning trying every combination of search terms I could string together but it didn't help. There was nothing pertinent on Rhiannon's own website and not a hint in any of the dozens of other sites that I looked at.

I was not a lot further forward, really. Clearly, I would just have to wait. The burning question was, could I wait until pictures trickled their way up to Derbyshire or would I give in to my urge to run down to London and find out for myself?

It wasn't long before circumstance offered me the answer to that one. About a week later, something dropped through my letter box - a heavy envelope that contained a thick, embossed card. It was an invitation:

THE HIVEMIND TRUST

You are invited to attend the pre-exhibition viewing of "Lightbulb", the powerful new work by renowned and controversial sculptor, Rhiannon Hughes.

**Saturday-Sunday, 14-15th December, 2013
11 am until 7 pm. Complimentary refreshments included.**

**The Atrium in The Stephenson Building,
The hiveMind Trust,
Euston Road, London. NW1 2BE**

Adrian Malakar (who else?) had scrawled on the back: "I got a fistful of preview invites. Want it? Do come. This is her masterpiece, or I'm a Muslim. Would love to see your review of this one.."

That settled it. It wouldn't be difficult to talk Robin into a trip south in the middle of December. We could combine it with some Christmas shopping and a visit to the parents. It would obviate the need for another trying trek down to Kent, over the Festive season.

I emailed Adrian back, telling him I would be at the preview. He was delighted. It transpired that he really did want me to write another review for *Sculpting Today!* I didn't make any promises but agreed to give him my feedback, if nothing else, once I'd seen the work.

From Rhiannon herself, I heard nothing. I didn't tell her I was coming. Why court trouble?

*

We drove down the M1 on the Friday. It was Friday the 13th, two weeks before Christmas. Despite this overlapping of bad portents, the journey was better than it might have been and we pitched up at my in-laws in time for a gin and tonic before a late dinner.

The next day, Robin and Ellie took his mother to Oxford Street and Hamley's while I went, alone, to Euston Road. Yet again, I was nervous. I seemed to have been nervous in all my dealings with Rhiannon this year. Whatever happened to that lovely easy home-coming feeling? Well, I had trashed that, along with a lot of other nice things. I pulled myself together. There was a fairly high chance that I wouldn't see her. In such an environment, she should be easy enough to dodge, if that was what I wanted.

I knew the building, I'd been there a couple of times before. It was a convenient and pleasant spot for a glass of something if one had time to kill waiting for a train back up to Manchester. So I came up from the Underground and headed straight out. I crossed Euston Road without mishap and bore right (past the disappointingly grand Quaker Institute) until I stood in front of The Stephenson Building.

I went under the massive neoclassical portico and through the front door. I waved my invitation under the nose of the woman on reception and walked up ten faux-marble steps through a humming crowd into The Atrium.

It was there, it was immediately there. Absolutely and unmistakably Rhiannon's work, shining high on a stone plinth in the middle of this celestial space. I walked around it several times, taking in the composition and the detail, trying to feel the spirit of the piece. I wanted to be absolutely sure I understood what she'd done.

It was..

It was..

It was...*redemptive*.

It was - is - one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen, before or since. I don't think I'll ever forget my first sight of it or the astonishing lightening of my heart that came with it. Such a shame that bit didn't last.

Waiting staff were circulating with fizzy wine of some kind and canapés. I garnered myself a drink and went to sit down. There were leather cubes scattered about The Atrium. I guessed they were meant for people to sit on but they could easily have been part of another installation, for all I knew. Anyway, no-one appeared to object. I leant back against a wall, closed my eyes and tried to understand how much better I felt. The relief was almost overwhelming. Unbidden, phrases started forming in my head. A potential review for Adrian almost wrote itself in those minutes.

"Sara." A familiar voice.

I opened my eyes and she was standing, looking down at me. She was resplendent - an Ice Queen in sumptuous black tailoring. I looked straight back but didn't say anything.

"I didn't know you were coming."

"Adrian sent me an invitation. I, um, hope that's OK?"

Her only reply was to shove up another leather cube and sit down beside me. With a sigh, I laid my head on her shoulder and felt her head, in turn, rest on mine. It felt so good to be home. Together, we looked at the scene and the figure in front of us. I don't know how long we stayed like that. Ten minutes? Forty five seconds? I really don't know, it was long enough.

Eventually, however, I needed to talk. There were things I wanted to know, as far as she was able or willing to tell me.

"How did it happen?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, that's so obviously Nate and Mindy. How on earth did the three of you manage to come together again?"

She thought for a second.

"I just told him the truth."

"Really?"

That struck me as potentially foolhardy. She went on:

"Of course. There's no point in avoiding the issue, is there? I told him that I needed his help to understand. If he wouldn't help me, then who could? I think he got that."

Ah, OK. The truth, some of the truth and nothing but some of the truth. It all sounded decently civilised. I beat back a recurrent image of her face, red and screaming, as she threw me off her boat.

“What made you think of..”

I was interrupted before I could find out what I wanted to know.

“Hello, ladies. How nice to see you both. Are you enjoying the show?”

It was Adrian. He'd spotted us, laid out on our leather cuboids. Even by his standards, he looked *à point*. I'm no real judge of a man's attire but the suit he had on looked to me to be a cut above the usual. There was the habitual snowy white shirt and, this time, the details (socks, handkerchief) were muted and complementary, rather than popping and bright. There was a tie, as well. Tied, cleverly, with a casually elegant knot.

It was the greatest pleasure to be able to smile, sincerely, at him.

“Terrific, isn't it, Adrian? I'm having a lovely time, thanks.”

He pounced upon the possible ambiguity in my words.

“And ‘Lightbulb’, Sara? What do you make of ‘Lightbulb’?”

He spoke to me but it was Rhiannon he was looking at. I shrugged, helplessly and devotedly.

“It's like you said, it's her masterpiece, I reckon.” I dug my friend in the ribs. “So, you don't have to worry about converting.”

Rhiannon looked a little puzzled at that but before she had time to ask a question, another familiar figure joined our little group.

“Rhiannon, there you are.” It was Nick, in full professional mode, heavily efficient. Beside his dark, chalk stripe three-piece, Adrian's beautiful suit appeared as of bri-nylon. “So far so good, I think. Any problems?”

“None at all, Nick, not that I've noticed,” she reassured him. “You spotted any glitches? How's the rest of the opening going?”

Of course. With a jolt, I remembered that all this ballyhoo was not just a fanfare for Rhiannon's work. There was another, rather bigger event happening around us. Nick smiled. His success was not to be doubted.

“Like it's on rails, Rhiannon, thanks very much.” He shot a cuff and looked at his watch. “Half past twelve. Come on, let's take a well-earned lunch ten minutes.”

He started to walk away and Adrian followed him. We two girls looked at each other for an instant then slid off our cubes and went after the men. Nick made his way to the cafeteria. It was full - more than full, people were queueing for seats. Somehow,

a large corner table became instantly available and the four of us sat down, girls against boys. One of the waiting staff approached with their tray of fizzy wine. Nick raised an eyebrow and the poor soul immediately backed away.

Shortly afterwards, a staff member, discreet in black mufti, arrived with an ice bucket, a bottle of Bollinger (non-vintage, I noted) and four chilled champagne flutes.

“It's out of the project budget,” Nick apologised, as he grasped the neck of the bottle. “I think Grand Année would be taking the piss.”

Deftly, almost imperceptibly, he opened the wine and poured out a foaming glass for everyone. He raised his own flute but it was a second or two before he spoke.

“A toast, I think,” he said, thoughtfully, “but I'm not quite sure what to.”

I sipped my cold, biscuity champagne. Delayed gratification is for suckers. Nick finally carried on:

“This is a big day for me. Not just for me but for every single one person who works here. We've been planning this opening event for the last six months, at least.”

His audience of three murmured appreciatively. I became aware that most of the other people in the café were listening as well.

“But however delighted I am about the successful implementation of our plans and the success of this opening event, I don't think that any of it compares to the joy I feel when I look at the powerful and unfathomably beautiful work of art that we are fortunate to have here in The Atrium.”

He aimed his glass, specifically, at my friend.

“Rhiannon, I would like to honour your talent and vision. I would also like to honour the courage and patience of the two people who gave you the means to create this very significant piece.”

He was approaching a climax.

“Ladies and gentleman, I give you Rhiannon Hughes and - in their absence - Nate and Mindy Turner.”

There was an approving round of applause. Adrian and I joined in as enthusiastically as anyone while Rhiannon blushed a deep red and looked at the floor. I had never seen her at such a loss for words; this was her biggest success to date. Idly, I wondered how far she would now take her innate talent.

People thronged around the table, offering congratulations and asking questions. Nick and Adrian dealt with most of it - Rhiannon was still largely too overcome to make any coherent reply. After five minutes or so, Nick had to go.

“Right, boys and girls, I’ve got to get on. Enjoy the rest of the day.” He beamed a large smile in my direction. “Sara, so nice to see you again. And under such propitious circumstances - this time.”

He left me impressed. No doubt his excellent memory for names was just one of the secrets of his success. Adrian, too, was making leaving noises. He had a number of other fish to fry. There was a whole shoal of people here that he was keen to talk to - or at least press flesh with.

“Sara, what do you think?” he asked, with an impish smile, as he drained his glass. “D’you reckon you could do a review that won’t bring Kalki down on us this time?”

I smiled straight back at him. He was an opportunistic little weasel but we always seemed to get on famously, despite that.

“In a heartbeat, Adrian. I’ll email you something before Christmas.”

“Perfect,” he smiled. “Thanks darling.”

As he went to leave, he had one final word with Rhiannon.

“Wonderful piece, darling. I wasn’t kidding, I really do think it’s your masterpiece.”

Rhiannon mumbled something indecipherable at him and he walked away, jaunty even in his back view. I looked at my friend curiously. I’d never known her so bereft of speech.

“You all right, love?” I asked, solicitously. “All a bit much?”

“Something like that,” she replied, vaguely.

I helped myself to more of that delicious champagne. There was a good quarter of the bottle left. I don’t get Bollinger so very often that I was prepared to leave it be.

“Nice speech Nick gave, don’t you think?”

“Oh yes, lovely.”

She was still being weird. I wondered what could be bugging her. Success usually sets her alight, rather than damping her ardour.

“Nice of him to mention Nate and Mindy too, I thought, even if they aren’t here?”

In the silence, I drank a bit more champagne.

“Talking of those two, are they coming today? Have they seen the finished piece yet?”

“No, they’re not coming today. Yes, they’ve seen the finished piece.”

She was getting weirder and weirder. I started to feel namelessly apprehensive. Something had to be wrong.

"And?"

"And what?"

"Good God, Rhi." I got exasperated. "Did they like it? I mean, it's quite important, isn't it?"

She sent me, sidelong, a mean look.

"Yeah, they liked the piece."

There was definitely something there. So far, all I could feel was the edges of it.

"Where did they see it? Here? Or at Halstead?"

"Here, they came yesterday while I was busy finishing everything off."

"And they liked it?"

"Yes."

I was still puzzled. I couldn't see any possible problem but there obviously was one.

"Well, that's all right then, isn't it?" I asked heartily. "I love it." I had an idea. "What about you? Do you like it?"

She stared at me for a long moment. Eventually, she answered me.

"I think it's probably the best thing I've ever done."

"So..?"

"So what?"

"So what's the problem? There's obviously a problem."

"No. No problem."

OK, fair enough. If she wouldn't tell me, she wouldn't tell me. Besides, I had another thing on my mind.

"A-n-y-way. So, how much do I owe you then?"

I was apprehensive. I didn't think she'd hold me to my promise to buy the sculpture, but she would be within her rights to do so, if she chose. This could break us.

"What do you mean?" She looked puzzled.

"Well, I promised you, didn't I?" I reminded her. "Said that if you convinced me, I'd buy it off you. It's only fair, it must have cost a bomb to make. Well," I continued, wryly, "you've certainly convinced me. So, how much?"

She smiled at that.

"Oh don't worry. Nick's bought it already. It's going to stay here."

The relief was significant.

"Thank God for that. I was already wondering how much jewellery I would have to sell. What'd he give you for it?"

She named a nicely rounded number and I drew my breath in on a whistle.

"Wheww! I would have had trouble matching that."

"No you wouldn't."

"I would, you know. I mean, I know we do nicely thanks, but we're not millionaires."

"No, I mean, I wouldn't have made you buy it."

"Decent of you."

"Not really." She seemed almost flat now. "Not when you consider that.."

She stopped and took a deep breath. Then another.

"Not when you consider that.."

She stopped again. It was painfully difficult. Whatever it was.

"Consider that..?" I prompted her.

She was staring straight ahead, clutching her champagne flute. I could see the white of her knuckles.

"..that it's a fake."

I almost dropped my own glass.

"A *fake?!"*

I craned my head around to get another glimpse of that monumental work in the other room.

"Yes, a fake. You know, a fake. A sham, a phoney." She was getting agitated; the red, screaming face was on its way back. "What other words can I use?"

"Rhiannon, what on earth are you talking about? You're not seriously telling me someone else has done that?"

"No no no no. Of course not. No, it's all my handiwork. But it's still a fake. As far as you're concerned."

This made no sense at all, that I could decipher.

"As far as I'm concerned? Rhi, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"No, I know." She sighed. "They were here yesterday."

"Nate and Mindy? Yes, you said. And they loved the work?"

"Yes. They were very nice about it."

"OK, go on."

"He was lovely. He confessed that he hadn't thought I would do it but he loved what I'd done and he thanked me for it. Then.."

"Then..?"

"Then he held out his hands. Like he wanted a hug."

"That's nice."

She shot me a murderous look.

"I tried, Sara. Honestly I did. I took his hands and I didn't mean to.."

I suddenly had a hollow sense of foreboding. My lovely, peaceful at-home feeling evaporated and I don't think, now, that it will ever come back. But I had to make her say it. I had to be sure.

"Didn't mean what, exactly?"

She breathed hard again. And yet again.

"I flinched, OK? When I took his hands, I flinched. *There!*" She threw the words down. "I fucking flinched. Now you know."

Yes. Now I knew.

"Did he see?"

She snapped at me hard.

"What do you think? Of *course* he bloody saw. And so did she, his wife."

"What did they do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Just stared at me. He looked..sad, really, more than anything else. Took his hands away and walked off without a word. The two of them together."

"Oh."

"So. Now you know. It's a fake. Lightbulb's a fake."

"Yes, I see that."

We were silent for a while. I placed my glass back on the table, half full. Rhiannon's head was rocking, ever so slightly. She was studying her knuckles, still squeezing her glass.

Eventually, she turned her wet face to mine.

"Can you still love me?"

"I don't know." Which was the honest truth. "It depends, I think."

"On what?"

"On what you do next."

She nodded. "I suppose."

I stood to go. "Let me know, eh?"

She nodded again.

I left.

Chapter Seventeen

We - Robin and Ellie and me - were supposed to go home the next day, the Sunday, but there was one more thing I wanted to do while I was in Kent and I couldn't do it until the Monday. Even then, it might not be possible.

Robin couldn't stay, he had to be in South Korea by Monday evening so he drove back on Sunday as planned. That left me and Ellie to come home by train the next afternoon. It wouldn't kill her, I figured, to miss one day of school. It was practically the end of term anyway. Ellie was delighted by the idea.

I had to do a bit of research but it's wonderful what information you have at the tips of your fingers these days. Rhiannon had told me bits and pieces; I was looking for a Citizens Advice Bureau in south east London somewhere. I couldn't remember where, exactly. Eltham? Catford? Ten minutes or so with Google yielded the information I needed.

It turns out you can go directly to Lewisham by train from Chatham. Who knew? It takes ages, mind you. Through Greenhithe and Blackheath and all sorts of other places that I'm only vaguely aware of.

The Citizens Advice Bureau is about a mile due south from Lewisham station so we started on a steady, fairly dismal trudge. Ellie, to give her credit, didn't start moaning until we were over half way there. Walking, jumping, balancing and piggy-backing got us through the rest of that mile.

We found it - a squat, square building right on the South Circular. Catford, rather than Lewisham, really. It must be hellishly noisy. I didn't even know if Nate would be there. To be honest, I was rather hoping he wouldn't be. Then I could say that at least I'd tried. I could simply flee back to Euston and back into my nice comfortable life and finally forget about this whole Gordian Knot of a problem forever.

I pushed the door open and the pair of us entered a small office. There was a large desk immediately opposite the door and Nate was sitting behind it. Hey ho, so much for my half-hopes. He looked at me blankly for a second or two and then I almost saw something click in his head. He frowned.

"Oh, it's you. What are you doing here?"

He was sitting in front of a computer. I noticed that he'd raised the keyboard up on a pile of solid legal books so he could type comfortably. Clever. And probably the best use those books have had in decades. Ellie immediately started fiddling with the pens in the desk tidy. Nate didn't seem to mind.

"Is she sending you to stalk me now?"

I pulled out the regulation chair in front of his desk and sat down. I drew Ellie into my lap and shook my head.

"No. She doesn't know I'm here."

"Then what *are* you doing here?"

I sighed. This was proving to be as uncomfortable as I feared it would.

"She told me what happened. Why you weren't at the opening. I..I just wanted to come and see if you're OK."

He was merciless.

"Why do you care? What would you do about it anyway?"

This was not getting any easier. I clawed my finger nails into the palm of my hand.

"I care because it's my fault," I retorted, with a little vehemence. "This whole *pasticcio*, I mean. I started it."

At that, he sat back in his chair and looked at me curiously. At least his anger seemed to die back a bit.

"She said that. Before the party. I didn't know what she meant."

I rubbed my head for a second or two.

"It was this time last year, pretty much. She had an exhibition. In Camden. I wrote a review of it. Which.."

I heard his sharp inhalation before I could finish.

"*You?* That was you? *You* wrote that awful review?"

I nodded.

"Yuh."

"And you're her oldest friend?"

"I know."

He shook his head in some disbelief. "Weird kind of friendship you two have."

"It's not quite what it was," I conceded.

But suddenly I saw the implication of his words. "You saw it? The review, I mean. How come?"

"Mindy found it," he replied, "right at the start of all this, while I was wondering what to do. Mindy googled her, looking for more information. She found it."

This was difficult for me to comprehend.

"So you read it?" I asked slowly. "When?"

"I dunno," he replied. "April? May? Just before that exhibition closed, as far as I remember."

"So right at the beginning. Before this all started? Before Synergy and everything?"

He nodded.

"You *knew* what she was and yet you went ahead with it anyway? Now *that's* weird."

He looked uncomfortable and I could see I'd hit a nerve.

"Yeah, I know," he answered. "But I thought that maybe you were wrong. A lot of people seemed to think you were wrong."

"No," I said simply. "I'm not wrong."

He wasn't the first person to have been swept along by Rhiannon. I was hardly in a position to judge him for that.

"Mummy?"

My child had been studying Nate intently from my lap and now she tugged at my hair.

"Mummy?"

"Yes, sweetheart. What is it?"

"Mummy, that man's got arms like the poorly-lympics."

"Yes, lovey, I know."

I glanced over at Nate with a little apprehension.

"That's what she called the Paralympic Games last year. She got very into them. Ellie Simmonds became a bit of a hero."

He smiled - thank goodness - straight at Ellie.

"You're quite right, chickadee. Ellie Simmonds is a *real* hero. Anyway," he said, coming back to me, "what do you mean, that you started all this?"

"Because she wanted to prove me wrong. After I sent her the review - I know, I know - we had a massive bust up. Basically, I told her I didn't think she could create anything other than the pointless, beautiful mannequins she always made."

He smiled at that, with a little humour.

"Red rag?"

I smiled back and relaxed a little.

"Something like that. I must have been mad, could have lost a lot of money."

"Uh?"

"Well, I told her that if she did it, if she really did it, I'd buy it from her. Seemed fair enough at the time, her stuff costs a fortune to produce."

He sat back in his chair and looked at me, startled. He was silent. More than that, he seemed speechless. I started to grow an uneasy sense that I'd just said something very, very stupid.

"I was a bet?" His voice was quiet, rather frightening.

"Well, not a bet exactly. I just didn't want her to.."

He wasn't remotely interested in my explanations.

"The pair of you put me through that public humiliation for a fucking..sorry, chickadee..for a *bet?!!*"

I was silent. I couldn't, in fact, have spoken had you prodded me with a sharp stick. Ellie ferreted through my rucksack, looking for something to alleviate the boredom.

"So who won?" he asked, ominously.

It was a good question. More than that, it was *the* question. And it wasn't an easy one to answer, knowing what I now knew.

"It's hard to say, don't you think?" I worked hard and just about eradicated the tremor from my voice. "She did, I suppose. Sort of, just not completely."

He was brusque. "No. I don't think. Lip service, that's all she's done."

"That's a bit harsh, don't you think? Couldn't you say, maybe, that her head has moved forward but her heart hasn't caught up yet?"

"You could say that. I wouldn't."

I tried again. I don't know why really. I was on his side rather than hers in all this.

"But you can't deny she's moved a bit. I mean, look at the difference between the two. Synergy and Lightbulb, I mean. They're a world apart."

He shrugged (an unsettling gesture, coming from him), unconvinced. I went on:

"In the end, Nate, Lightbulb *is* an astonishing sculpture. In fifty years time, I'll be dead, you'll be dead, even Rhiannon will have to loosen her grip and just bloody die at some point. But Lightbulb - you and Mindy - will still be shining as brightly as ever. It's an amazing legacy."

He shrugged again, his mouth twisting in a so-so sort of way.

"You sound like Mindy."

That made me smile.

"She's right. I expect she's usually right."

Now it was his turn to smile. But we had wandered off the point a bit and Ellie was more than fidgeting now, she was getting openly restless. Another five minutes and she'd have everything off the desk.

"Look," I said, "we have to get going. Are you OK?"

That was all I really wanted to know. That was why I had found my way here. He had a point though. What was I going to do if he wasn't? He didn't look at me for a couple of seconds but tapped randomly at a few keys. Then he raised his sludgy, greeny-grey eyes.

"Yeah, I guess," he said at last. "It's just that, I gave up hoping. Years ago. And now I've had to give up all over again."

"I'm sorry," I said, even though I wasn't exactly sure what he meant.
"People can change sometimes, Nate."

He grunted. "People never change at all, Sara."

"Evolve, then. Maybe that's a more accurate way of putting it. I really believe that, Nate. Honestly, I do. It's just," I shrugged myself, "evolution takes time."

Suddenly he was angry again. He bashed both hands down on the keyboard. Ellie clutched at me.

"I don't *want* a legacy. A legacy's no fucking good to me. I need a life." He looked around him a little wildly. "I've *got* a life. I don't need.."

He broke off but the unspoken accusation hovered in the air between us like a wraith. I stood, it was time we left.

"I know. I'm sorry. Take care, Nate."

He said nothing for a moment then nodded curtly.

"Nm."

I hustled my girl out of Lewisham's Citizens Advice Bureau and out into the rain. We got a bus back up to the station.

Chapter Eighteen

This is it, I suppose.

This is where it ends, at least for the moment. I've written down everything I can think of and everything that I can remember. I've told you, as honestly as I am able to, everything that happened.

It's a relief, really. To know that it stops here. Oh I know, believe me I know, that it's still not tidy. I generated a horrible mess when I embarked upon this quest for the truth and I haven't really been able to clear it up so far. But there is nothing more I can do. For me, it stops here.

For the others? Well, I don't know. There are a lot of things that I don't know. There are, I'm pretty sure, large chunks of all this that I have never been told about. So I don't know what the others will do. I don't know where they're at, so to speak, so I certainly can't know where they'll go. I may find out. I may not.

For me, it stops here.

Robin will be pleased. He's done his best, I'm sure of that. He's backed me all the way through this maelstrom of a year, even if he hasn't quite understood why it has all mattered so much. But he's not used to me acting like an emotional weathervane and it hasn't made life in our household any easier.

I do wonder if any one single person has benefited from it all. Would we - all of us - have been better off if I'd just stayed schtum? If I'd left the blindfold on? I don't know. I told you, I don't know. I don't feel any better for it, that's for sure. And yet, somehow, I don't think I'd go back to where I was.

I have one final thing to do, the loose end that will tie up this bundle for me and let me shove it all under the bed. I promised Adrian another review and another review I will give him.

What to write? There are two options really - the before-I-knew and the after-I-knew, if you like. Yesterday, I sat down in front of my computer and wrote both. I let them both splurge out in unexpurgated form and then read them back as dispassionately as I could.

What would you do?

Epilogue

Extract from *Sculpting Today!*, January 2014.

Review: Lightbulb by Rhiannon Hughes at The hiveMind Trust*

Lightbulb, on permanent display at The hiveMind Trust, Euston Road, feels like a watershed work for its creator, sculptor Rhiannon Hughes. From here, she should go on to take her place on the world's stage, as her promise has always suggested.

We are used to seeing Hughes' exquisite portrayal of godlike human specimens but now she would seem to have turned her vision outwards whilst retaining the power, beauty and anatomical accuracy that have become her trademark.

Lightbulb comprises two figures, a man and a woman. They are depicted using Hughes' most recent technique - strips of steel are arranged into muscular bundles, the bundles in their turn building up into human forms. These two figures clearly belong together. Their bodies lean into each other; he is holding her, she is caressing his face with both hands. The sexual connection between them is unmistakable.

Both are beautiful and both follow Hughes' preferred aesthetic of lean, athletic beauty. However, they are not identical peas in a pod. Whilst she lifts up her hands to his face, he grasps her torso with incomplete hands that arise abruptly from his pectoral girdle on abbreviated arms. He is, without any doubt whatsoever, phocomelic - most likely, as a result of the thalidomide scandal of the 1960s.

These two figures clearly express ecstasy. They rejoice in each other. They rejoice neither *despite* their differences nor *because* of their differences. They simply rejoice in each other. Ours is such a primitive age that this image, this idea, still has the power to shock. Thus are we damned.

Lightbulb demonstrates Hughes' long-standing preoccupation with strength and beauty as well as anything she has ever done. However, it does a great deal more than that. It rings out a carillon call of joy and hope. It shines a high-wattage spotlight on ideals of open-mindedness and inclusiveness which render "difference" irrelevant. It seeks to redefine how we measure and label "perfection" and "beauty". Finally, Hughes would seem to have filled the void that some would say was detectable at the heart of her earlier works. This is how people could be. This is how some people already are.

Lightbulb, truly, gives us something we can strive for.

Sara Spagnola

*Stop Press: we have just discovered that Rhiannon Hughes is to be admitted into the Royal Academy, on the strength of this work. *Sculpting Today!* offers her sincere congratulations for this well-deserved accolade.